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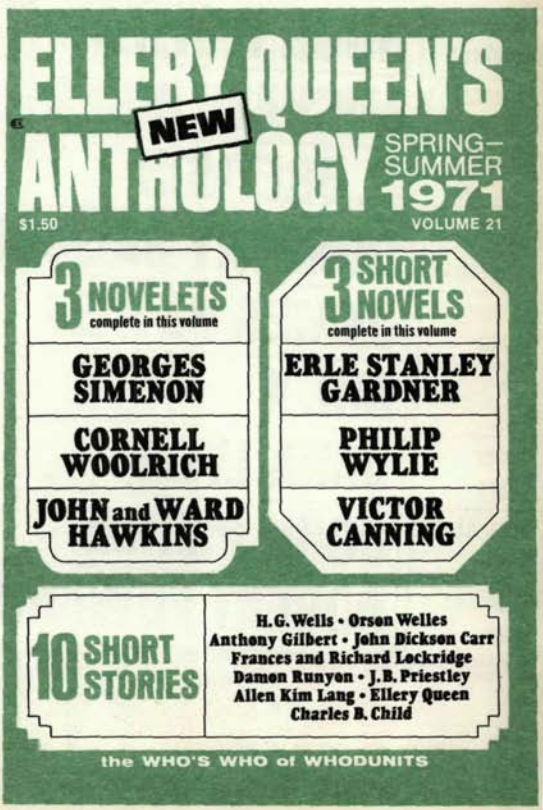

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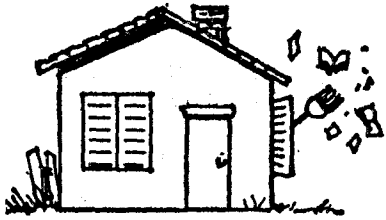

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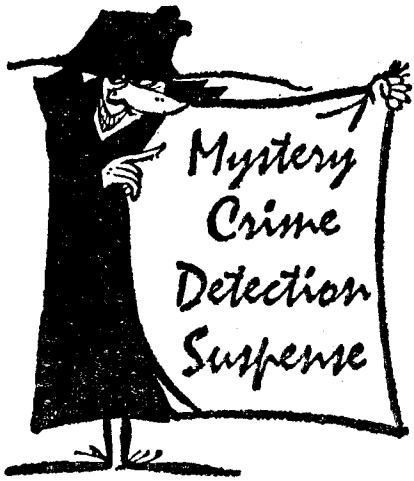

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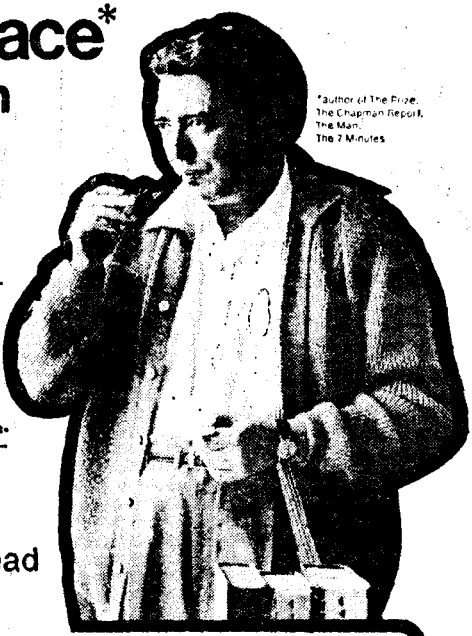

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TO CATCH A SPY

by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

There were signs in three languages over the ramps that fed into the airport from the passenger disembarking area; the signs directed nationals to the right, incoming foreigners to the left. There were no porters about, so I shifted my suitcase from one hand to the other and followed the crowd to the left into customs.

For a country that was beginning to build a reputation as a tourist attraction, they certainly didn't go all out to make a visitor feel welcome. The customs room was stark and bare except for a long wooden table and a huge picture of Lenin staring suspiciously down from the wall. Or maybe he just seemed that way to me. Maybe to a dedicated Communist he looked sternly paternal.

But in any case I was an old hand at being stared at suspiciously. So I met his eyes blandly and handed my passport to the uniformed customs official without a visible qualm.

Not that I needed to worry about the passport. The same people who made them for the State Department did the C.I.A.'s. And the stamps and seals were as good as you'd find anywhere. The name inside wasn't the one I'd been born with, of course, but by now I'd got used to changing my name. You get used to a lot of things when you work for the C.I.A.

The official frowned professionally and began to leaf

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through the green and gold booklet. He was a tall man with close-cropped hair, no sideburns at all, and a smooth arrogant face. "Is this your first visit to our country?" he said without looking up.

"No," I said. It always pays to be truthful in small things, because it's the small things that can trip you up and expose the big lie. "I was here once before. Shortly after the war."

"I see," the official said. He turned another page. "And what is the purpose of your visit? Business or pleasure?"

I smiled. "A little of both," I said. "Business and pleasure." Truthfully again, too, because that was just the way Giddings had put it to me.

"How'd you like a little trip east?" he had said. "You've earned a rest after that affair with Heussinger and young Herold. And this would give you a chance to mix a little business with pleasure." We were in his office overlooking the Ku'damm; I was in my usual chair opposite his desk and he was lounging behind it and toying with his ever-present pencil.

I looked at him skeptically. My experience was that these trips generally turned out to be more business than pleasure.

Giddings caught my gaze and waved the pencil protestingly. "No," he said, "I'm serious. Southeastern Europe's becoming quite a tourist attraction these days, what with the mountains and the beaches. And all things considered nobody would object to your spending a couple of days or weeks there after the job's done. What's more, if you aren't too blatant about it, you might even get a good part of it covered on your expense voucher too."

"Sure," I said. "And what's the job?"

Giddings pursed his lips and looked up at the ceiling. "One of our people got himself killed over there last week," he said. "We'd like you to go in and find out why."

"I don't have to go in," I said drily. "I can tell you why without leaving this room. He found out something the Commies didn't want him talking about."

It had to be that, of course, and Giddings knew it as well as I. If the dead man's cover had merely been blown, they'd have set up a show trial or arranged a trade for one of their people we held. That's the way things work these days. Killing agents just because they're agents went out with Mata Hari. Killing them to keep them from talking will, of course, never go out of style.

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"What you really want," I said, "is for me to find out what he knew that was worth killing him for."

Giddings made a little dismissive motion with his pencil. "If you want to put it that way," he said, "yes."

"I want to put it that way," I said, "particularly since they just might kill me too."

"Only if they caught you," Giddings said easily. "Which if you're reasonably careful they won't do." He straightened in his chair. "Of course," he went on, meeting my eyes just as earnestly as if he really meant what he was saying, "if you *really* don't want this assignment—"

But of course he knew I'd go. Because I knew somebody had to . . .

Now the customs official was asking me what my business was. He listened patiently while I recited the cover story that Giddings had arranged; then he closed my passport with a snap and nodded to his assistant. Together they went through my luggage with a thoroughness that would have put a horde of ravaging locusts to shame. I'll say this for them, though: when they were done they put everything back in with roughly the same degree of neatness.

The official handed my passport back. "Have a pleasant visit," he said with no particular show of caring one way or the other.

I smiled at him anyway, said I was sure I would, and went out to catch a taxi to the hotel that the local version of Intourist had arranged for me. I stopped there just long enough to register and drop off my bag. Then I went back out and hailed another cab.

The driver's eyes began a nervous little flick when I gave American Embassy as my destination, but that was all. He didn't try to make any conversation on the way over, though, and I noted with wry amusement that he didn't waste any time scooting off after depositing me a couple of yards from an open iron-grilled gate, with the eagle in a circle seal of the United States set square in the middle of it. I watched the cabbie until he swung around a corner out of sight, then I turned and went through the gate and up the graveled drive.

There was a pleasant-faced girl seated at a desk just inside the door. I gave her the name on my passport and five minutes later was in an upstairs office seated across from a man whose eyes were every bit as unfriendly as Lenin's, even though theoretically at least he and I were on the same side. His

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surname was Arnold and he was the Deputy Chief of Mission—Number Two man under the Ambassador.

"So you're the one they've sent in to replace Johns," he said coldly.

"In a manner of speaking," I said, "yes. But what I'm really after is to find out why they killed him."

"The official verdict," Arnold said, "was that Johns died in an automobile accident."

"I know," I said. "I read the official verdict. I also read the autopsy report by the doctor who examined the body once it crossed over into West Germany. It says there were injuries to the back of the skull that couldn't have been caused by the accident."

"And all undoubtedly very true," Arnold said. "Nevertheless, it might still be best for all concerned to let the matter rest with the *official* verdict."

"Perhaps," I agreed. "But then it isn't my decision to make." I smiled at him cheerfully. "Or yours either, for that matter."

Arnold looked at me with undisguised distaste and pressed a buzzer on his desk. "I'm going to turn you over to our Mr. Murphy," he said. "Murphy served as Johns's liaison within the Embassy, and he will help you all he can. But," Arnold added with heavy emphasis, "instructions from on high or no, I will not stand for anything that will embarrass the Embassy or our efforts here. Do you understand that?"

"Perfectly," I said.

Murphy popped in so promptly after that that he must have been waiting in the wings for his cue. Almost as if in contrast to Arnold who was a lean crusty Yankee aristocrat, Murphy turned out to be a stocky man with smooth black hair, fashionable sideburns, and a plump friendly face.

"I've just been explaining to Mr."—Arnold looked down and read my name off the card the receptionist had sent up—"the limits on the assistance we can afford him."

"Sure," Murphy said. He shook my hand. "Why don't I take you down to my office," he said, "and fill you in there on what I know about Johns?"

"Fine with me." I said goodbye to Arnold, who nodded formally in return and went back to his work.

"Friendly type," I said to Murphy as we walked down the corridor to his office.

"Who? Arnold?" Murphy said. "Oh, he's not so bad. He just grew up under Sumner Welles, and he still believes gentlemen don't read each other's mail."

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"And you?" I probed.

Murphy grinned. "Me?" he said. "I'm a security man. Everytime I see an envelope my fingers start to itch." He opened a door and waved me into his office. It was smaller than Arnold's and more cluttered.

Murphy took off his jacket and hung it carelessly over the peg of a standing coat rack. "All right," he said, sitting down at his desk and loosening his collar. "What can I tell you that you don't already know?"

I sat down opposite him. "You might start with what really happened to Johns," I said.

Murphy pulled a wry face and shrugged slightly. "You read the official report," he said. "That just about sums up all we know. We got a phone call from the local police—the regular police, not the secret—that there'd been an accident involving one of our citizens. When we got there, it turned out to be Johns." He shrugged again. "None of us who were in on who Johns really was believed it was an accident, of course. But there were no survivors or witnesses and a blank wall of Communist official silence that we couldn't have gotten around even if Arnold had been inclined to let us try."

I nodded understandingly. "What was Johns working on at the time?" I said.

Murphy grinned ruefully and shook his head. "I haven't the foggiest notion," he said. "I know Arnold told you I was Johns's liaison, but that's only a fancy way of saying I was his mailbox. Whenever Johns had anything to transmit, he'd drop it off with me to put in the diplomatic pouch. Arnold didn't like it, but he had his orders."

I nodded again. It wasn't an unusual arrangement. The Communists knew we did it, of course. Just as we knew their pouches leaving Western capitals contained the same kind of packages. But long tradition made the pouches inviolable, and since it suited the purposes of both sides, I supposed that they would remain so—at least, for the time being anyway.

"Still," I persisted, "you were Johns's only official contact and an old security man to boot. You must have been curious."

"Sure," Murphy said, still grinning. "But never to the point of trying to satisfy that curiosity. The messages were sealed when I got them. I just added my own seal as a double safeguard and left it at that. It kept Arnold off my back and to tell you the truth I think I was

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happier not knowing. The things you cloak-and-dagger boys get up to are enough to give anybody the willies."

"And Johns never said anything that would give you a clue?"

"Never a word," Murphy said. "Oh, we talked, of course, but mostly about going back to America and things like that." Murphy's grin grew lopsided. "He was due to leave in another three months, you know."

I sighed. "Yes, I know." I stood up. "Well, I thank you for your time. And I'll be in touch."

Murphy nodded. "Where to now?" he said.

I winked at him. "You'll be happier not knowing," I said.

Actually, I'd done enough for one day, I felt. Particularly since I was supposed to be combining pleasure with business. So I went back to my hotel and slept the sleep of the just. There was a microphone concealed behind the headboard of my bed, but all it picked up were my snores.

I was followed as soon as I left the hotel the next morning.

I had decided to walk, partly because it was a nice day and partly because when I'd been here before, the cab drivers had been required to report the destinations of all foreign passengers to the secret police. And I wasn't sure they didn't still. It hadn't mattered about the Embassy, but I definitely didn't want to risk drawing attention to any of the other places I had to visit.

In any case, I hadn't gone two blocks when I spotted my tail. He was a nondescript little man as all good tails should be. The only thing that gave him away was that he was working too hard at keeping the distance between us constant. I wondered if he was alone or part of a team.

To find out I rounded the next corner and stopped almost immediately to look in a store window. Out of the corner of my eye I saw my little man saunter across the street and another man equally nondescript move up into his place. That meant there were at least three of them—two in line behind me and one across the street. The technique of changing places at corners was supposed to keep me from catching on. And it worked very well with amateurs, but to a pro—especially a suspicious one—the unvarying ritual was as obvious a sign as a light in a window.

The big question, though, was how to get rid of them.

The first thing, of course, was not to let them realize I

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had caught on. So I stopped checking on them. They weren't going to lose me and I had nothing to gain by trying to pick out the third man. So I just kept on walking, stopping at occasional windows and turning enough corners at random to keep them guessing about the direction I was actually headed in.

Finally I spotted what I wanted—a cab discharging a passenger. I hopped in before anybody could say boo.

"Airport," I said to the driver.

He had opened his mouth to protest. But at the thought of that juicy fare he shrugged and set his meter. And off we went.

As I'd hoped, my tails didn't have motor transport available. Not that it really mattered. After all, they had the cab's number and the cab had a radio, didn't it?

We'd gone about six blocks when that radio crackled and the driver held a short dialogue with it. It was in a dialect I wasn't familiar with, but then I didn't have to know it to be pretty sure he was passing on our destination to his dispatcher. I smiled to myself and settled back on the seat.

I waited another two blocks, then began patting my pockets and making pantomime signs of panic. "Cigarettes," I said. "I'm out of cigarettes." I leaned forward and pointed to get the driver's attention. "Hey, look," I said, "stop at that shop up ahead and let me run in and get some."

The driver gave me an exasperated look. "I can't stop in this traffic," he said.

Of course he couldn't. That was the whole point. "Well, don't stop then," I said. "Drive around the block and pick me up on the way back."

The driver's face turned suspicious. So I took the universal persuader—$10 U.S.—from my wallet and dropped it on the seat beside him.

"If you're worried about the fare," I said, "that'll more than cover it."

Reassured, he pulled over to the curb and let me out.

Of course, by the time he got back I was long gone. The only problem was that now my tails would realize that I'd gone to a lot of trouble to shake them. They'd wonder why and that wouldn't make things any easier if I had to deal with them in the future.

The girl in the florist's shop was small and dark and not really pretty—not in the conventional sense anyway. But she carried herself with such regal grace and self-possession that you were willing to overlook

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that. Her name was Anna Cappron and she had been one of Johns's network.

"May I help you?" she said.

"I'm here to buy some flowers for a friend," I said.

Her eyes flickered slightly and she moved to a display. "Roses are for friends," she said, touching one lightly with her hand.

"White roses," I said, feeling slightly ridiculous as I always did when I went through these rituals, "not red."

Anna Cappron nodded. "In the back," she said, lowering her voice despite the fact that we were alone in the shop.

I went through a curtained doorway at the rear of the shop into a smaller room furnished half as an office, half as living quarters. There were a few feminine touches that tried bravely to dress it up, but all in all it was a pretty grim place to spend a life. I sat down in the only chair, facing the doorway.

A few moments later Anna Cappron came in, brushed aside the slight movement I made in the direction of rising, and perched on the edge of the office desk. She had extremely nice legs, I decided, wondering if she had sat there deliberately to call my attention to them.

"Do you have instructions for me?" she said.

"None at the moment," I said. "They just sent me in to find out why Johns was killed." I paused and looked up at her. "Any ideas?"

She shook her head silently. Her face was set and controlled, deliberately expressionless.

"What was he working on at the time he was killed?" I said.

Anna's face didn't change, but her eyes grew suspicious. "Your people got his reports," she said. "You should know."

I nodded. "I'm talking about the report he didn't get to make," I said.

She relaxed somewhat. "We hadn't made contact to pass information for almost two weeks before he was killed," she said. "The only report I had then concerned cabinet reactions to our premier's maneuverings to loosen the Russian grip on our country. Nothing startling and certainly not the sort of thing they'd kill for to keep secret."

"Something from one of his other agents then," I said, half to myself.

Anna shook her head vigorously. "Not possible," she said. "There were five agents in the network besides myself: Karl, Georg, Franz, Lilo, and Michael. None of them knew Johns. They all reported to me and I passed it on to him to protect his cover."

"I see," I said. I pulled my

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mouth to one side ruefully. "That means it had to be something he found out himself and didn't tell anybody about. Which complicates things enormously." Understatement of the year. It made my job impossible.

Anna Cappron started to say something, then caught herself and held back.

"Go ahead," I said. "Say it."

She looked away. "Nothing," she said.

"Let me decide whether it's nothing or not," I said.

She threw back her head and set her chin defiantly. "I would have known if he'd had any information," she said. "He would have told me and we would have worked on it together."

I looked at her closely. She sounded very positive. I wondered what gave her that confidence. "Maybe," I said slowly, an idea forming in my mind. "But you hadn't seen him for two weeks before he died. He could have learned a lot in two weeks."

Anna's eyes dropped. "That's not quite true," she said. "I said we hadn't made contact to pass on information. And we hadn't, because I had nothing to pass on. But"—her voice faltered—"we did see each other. We saw each other regularly." She brushed at her eyes with one hand. "We were in love," she said simply. "He was going to take me out with him when he went back to America."

I sighed. It was what I'd suspected. "When was the last time you saw Johns, Anna?" I said.

"The night he was killed," she said. "They must have caught him shortly after he left me."

"And he said nothing that evening that would indicate he was on to something important?"

"No."

"How did he seem? Nervous? Excited?"

She shook her head. "No. Very relaxed and happy. In fact, if anything he was more relaxed and happy that evening than he had been for a long time."

"I see," I said, and stood up. "If you think of anything else that might help, get in touch with me the same way you made contact with Johns. I'll be around the next couple of weeks anyway. Perhaps longer." I smiled at her. "Okay?"

She nodded and tried to smile back, but somewhere along the way it broke down.

I put my hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry," I said.

She shied away from my touch and pulled herself to-

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gether. "I'll show you out," she said. Her face wore the same regal mask it had when I'd first entered the shop.

At the door she said, "I'll be getting reports from the agents. Do I pass them on to you?"

"Yes, for the time being," I said. "I'll let you know when a permanent replacement arrives."

She nodded and unlocked the door for me to leave.

After the flower shop the sun felt good on my face and hands, and I walked along enjoying it. The first warning I had that everything wasn't all right came from the sudden panic on the face of a pedestrian approaching me. I swung around, back to the building, but it was already too late. The car had swerved up on the sidewalk, door already swinging open to block me off and pin me between car and wall.

A balding man with a thin scholarly face and mild eyes behind rimless glasses leaned toward me from the driver's side. "Get in," he said. He was smiling, but the gun in his hand wasn't. I got in.

The door scraped against the wall as he started off. "Close that thing," he said with a show of irritation.

I leaned out, caught the door handle, and debated briefly whether I could risk diving out. But out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of the mild-eyed man watching me. He seemed amused. I pulled the door shut.

"Very good," he said approvingly. "That's the decision I would expect a professional to make. And I must say you've behaved most professionally since coming to our country. I did expect you at the flower shop sooner, though," he added almost as an afterthought.

"What flower shop?" I said.

His eyes mocked me. "The one you just left," he said. "Where no doubt you bought some flowers for a friend. White roses, to be precise."

I looked at him with interest. "Who are you anyway?" I said.

He stopped laughing and concentrated on his driving. "I won't bore you with my real name," he said, "any more than I'll ask you yours. But Johns knew me as Georg." His eyes flicked back to me briefly. "I was one of his agents."

"Now that's interesting," I said. "Because the girl said she was the only one who knew Johns."

"That was the way it was supposed to work," Georg said. "But six months ago Johns was blown to the secret police. As

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soon as I found out, I made my own contact with him."

"I see," I said. "And just how did you find out, Georg?"

He was amused again. "Didn't the girl tell you?" he said. "Ah, but then all she knows is my cover in the Ministry of Finance." His smile broadened. "I'm a major in the secret police," he said. "I pick up a lot of useful information that way."

"And use it to play both ends against the middle."

Georg shrugged. "You can call it that if you like," he said. "Personally, I prefer to think that I'm merely hedging my bets. Something every careful gambler does."

"Sure," I said. I twisted on the seat so that I could watch Georg more closely. "If the secret police were on to Johns six months ago," I said, "why didn't they stop him then?"

"For the same reason they haven't stopped you," Georg said. "They knew who he was. Stop him and somebody new and unknown would take his place. But even more important, they knew what he was doing and what information he'd picked up." Georg paused, then added vehemently, "Somebody was leaking everything that went into Johns's reports."

I asked the obvious question. "Who?" I said.

Georg shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "Nobody below the very top level does and they aren't talking." He shot a quick glance at me and added hastily, "At least not to a lowly major." Which was a pretty good indication that he'd lied about his rank. But I'd expected that anyway. Nobody in Georg's position would throw out details that might give away his true identity. "That's why I made contact with Johns. It was risky, but not as risky as letting one of my superiors begin to realize that some of Johns's information had to come from within the organization. I hadn't had any luck in uncovering the leak, but I figured Johns just might from his end." He grimaced. "And it looks like he might have too—not that it did any of us any good," he added.

"No," I said. We rode in silence a while. Then I said, "Why did you take that risk, Georg? Why didn't you go through Anna Cappron the way you usually did?"

Sunlight glittered on Georg's glasses. "Because Anna Cappron was the only one I know who had access to *all* the information Johns received," he said. When I didn't respond, he added after a moment, "But then you don't believe that about her, do you?"

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"No," I said. "But then I don't *not* believe it either."

I had Georg drop me off some six blocks from the American Embassy, because I was sure my tails would be watching for me there as well as at the hotel.

"Our people," he said with something like pride in his voice when I told him about them. "We were on to you as soon as you arrived in the country."

"Interesting," I said. "Now how do I get in touch with you if I want you?"

Georg shook his head. "You don't," he said. "I'll get in touch with you."

"All right," I said. "But make it something less drastic than hauling me off the street at the point of a gun."

Georg smiled briefly. "I regretted the necessity. But you understand that I had no time to waste on explanations and yet I had to be sure you'd get in. Next time"—he paused as if in thought—"a message to your hotel room. Misdirected, of course. For Miss White. Miss Rose White."

He was still laughing at his own joke when I got out of the car. I watched him drive off. Then I walked the rest of the way to the Embassy, thinking my own thoughts. And not particularly liking them.

Murphy was in his shirt sleeves behind his cluttered desk, just as I had left him the day before. "Well," he said, flipping the cover of a manila folder closed and shoving it to one side as I came in, "I didn't expect to see you again so soon."

"I'm a fast worker," I said drily. "I have to be to keep ahead of my competition." I dropped into the same chair I'd used before. "I was followed when I left the hotel this morning."

Murphy raised his eyebrows and whistled soundlessly. "Now isn't that something," he said. He leaned back in his chair and regarded me thoughtfully. "You want us to help you get out of the country before they pick you up?"

"It may come to that," I said. "But right now I want to find out more about the diplomatic pouch."

"The pouch?" Murphy shrugged. "There's not much to tell," he said. "It's made up in the Administrative Section and sent out once a week by courier. Oftener if there's a need."

"I see," I said. "And everyone in the Embassy has access to it?"

"No," Murphy said, dragging the word out. "In fact, if anything, we're stricter than

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your usual garden-variety Embassy on that score. It's pretty much taken for granted here that all the local help—maintenance people and the like—are reporting to some intelligence organization or the other." He grinned suddenly. "Even Arnold goes along with that. No Communist could be a gentleman, of course." When I didn't smile back, he shrugged and pulled a face at me. "In any case," he went on, "besides the Ambassador, Arnold, and myself, the only person who has direct access to the pouch is the officer in Administration who makes it up. We're pretty liberal about what goes in, of course. But anybody who has anything to put in passes it through him."

"Including Johns's reports?" I said.

Murphy shook his head. "No," he said. "Those I put in myself just before the pouch was sealed. Before that they were kept in my safe." He swiveled around to kick at a squat iron box against the wall behind his desk. "And believe me, nobody gets into this baby unless I'm here to help them with the combination."

I believed him; I'd seen safes like that before. I'd even tried to break into some. "What would be the possibility of the pouch's being opened and resealed?"

"Without our knowing about it?" Murphy shook his head again. "My first, offhand inclination is to say it's impossible. Except that as a security officer I know that nothing is impossible when you really set your mind on it. Even so, I'd say the most anybody could do it would be once or twice. If it got to be a routine thing, they'd be sure to notice on the other end that the seals had been tampered with."

"Perhaps," I said.

"Yeah," Murphy said. He leaned forward and put his elbows on the desk. "Why all the questions about the pouch anyway? And don't tell me I'd be happier not knowing. You've been hitting pretty close to questions of Embassy security and that's my bag, not yours."

He had a point, of course, and I had no choice but to confide in him if I wanted his continued cooperation. So I told him about Anna Cappron and Georg. Not everything, of course. Like Georg earlier, I identified them only by code names and blurred any details that might betray their true identities. When you've been at this game long enough, ingrained habit makes you cautious.

When I finished, Murphy whistled his silent whistle again. "Now isn't that something?" he

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said. "A traitor in Johns's network." He cupped his chin in his hand and rubbed his fingers along the side of his jaw. "It has to be the girl," he said at last.

"If we can believe Georg," I said.

"Why should he lie?" Murphy said.

I shrugged. "With a man like Georg, who knows?" I said. "For that matter, though, why should the girl betray Johns? She was in love with him."

Murphy smiled ruefully. "Oldest motive in the world," he said. "Spurned love. I told you earlier that Johns talked to me a lot about what he planned to do when he got back to the United States. And believe me, nothing he said indicated it was going to be anything but single blessedness." He shrugged and cocked his head briefly to one side. "The girl found out and goodbye Johns."

"Could be," I said. "Let's find out for sure."

Murphy was interested. "How?" he said.

"Well," I said, "if she is the leak she'll pass on anything I tell her to her superiors and in turn it will filter down to Georg. So why don't I give her some deliberately false information? Like, for instance, the name of Johns's replacement."

Murphy grinned. "Who'd you have in mind for the fall guy? You or me?"

"Neither of us," I said. "Who's the newest member of the Embassy staff?"

"A commercial officer named Caldwell," Murphy said. "But it seems kind of a rotten trick to put the secret police on to him."

"Not really," I said. "For a while he won't be able to go to the bathroom without somebody reporting it. But the secret police here are pros. It won't take them long to find out he's only what he claims to be and they'll drop him. And," I added, shrugging, "if it turns out the girl isn't the leak, they'll never hear about him at all. In which case, I'll just have to keep digging."

Murphy looked thoughtful. "Yes," he said. He slapped his hand down on the flat of his desk. "All right," he said.

I spent the next two weeks devoting myself to the pleasure part of my trip. I'm not much of a mountain man, but the local beaches were almost everything that Intourist had claimed them to be. I was followed everywhere, of course, and was more than a little suspicious of some of the ladies I met. But that's the way it is in my job, and you soon learn to make the best of it.

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And then the message for Rose White came. I was more than a little disappointed. I'd begun to hope I was wrong.

I left the hotel as usual the next morning with the usual nondescript little man on my tail. But ten minutes of twisting and turning through the downtown traffic shook him off. Two weeks of following me to the beaches and to what passed for night life hereabouts had made them a mite careless.

But not that careless. I took it for granted that someone I hadn't spotted and wasn't likely to was still trailing me.

It really didn't make any difference. I found a bench in the park in the main square and spent an hour feeding pigeons, then went back to my hotel.

Once inside my room I bolted the door and went silently about my work. The message was taped to the headboard of my bed right next to the microphone. While I had led my watchers on a wild goose chase, Georg had slipped in as we had arranged and put it there. I read it once, then burned it.

It was short and easy to remember: "Word is that Johns's replacement is named Caldwell. Cover—commercial attaché at Embassy."

If anything, Arnold's eyes were even unfriendlier than on our first meeting. "I believe," he said, biting the words off short, "that I specifically warned you that I would not tolerate anything that would embarrass the Embassy and yet you deliberately spread word around that an Embassy employee—a career foreign-service officer—is really a spy for the C.I.A."

Murphy mopped his brow. We were in Arnold's office—a warm room and getting warmer. "Well, yes," he said. "But no real harm was done and we did catch a spy. A spy who was a murderer as well."

"That's right," I put in mildly.

Arnold's eyes swiveled to me. "No harm was done, was it?" he said bitterly. "Don't you realize that now the whole Embassy staff is compromised?"

I met his gaze evenly. "I'm afraid the Embassy was already compromised," I said. "The girl isn't the leak. Murphy is."

I smiled slightly and turned toward Murphy. "I was pretty sure it wasn't the girl all along. Because I was followed by the secret police when I left the hotel to meet her. She couldn't have put them on to me because she still didn't know about me. Only you and Arnold knew."

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I sensed rather than saw Arnold stiffen. "I didn't discount Arnold entirely," I went on, "but you were the one who had access to Johns's reports. So I set up a little test—and you failed it, Murphy.

"The girl didn't tell anyone that Caldwell was Johns's replacement. Again, she couldn't have. I never mentioned Caldwell to her. I told only *you* that I was going to. So you had to be the one who leaked it to the Communists.

"Just as you leaked Johns's reports to them. Johns found you out. That's why he was happier that last night with the girl; he no longer suspected her. The trouble is, he played it too close to his chest and you had him killed before he could expose you."

I shook my head. "That's a mistake I'm not going to make. That's why Arnold is here and that's why there are a couple of Marine guards outside that door."

Murphy didn't move, but his eyes were full of hate.

I let my smile broaden and turn rueful. "Don't take it so hard, Murphy," I said. "You're an old security man. You ought to know you can't trust anybody."

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THE WILL-O'-THE-WISP MYSTERY

Conclusion: *The King*

by MR. X

What has gone before: When a masked gang hijacks a prison van and aids the escape of six convicted criminals, including underworld king Nick Bruno, the local police call in David Piper, known as The Manhunter—first Director of the state's newly formed Department of Apprehension. Working with Inspector Fleming and Sheriff Barker, Piper learns through underworld contacts that a large sum of money was involved in the escape. At first he suspects that the six escapees are linked in a projected crime, and with the help of a police informer, one-eyed Tommy, he begins to track them down one by one.

Forger Joe Reilly is arrested while leading a double life as the manager of an art gallery, and swindler Charlie Hall is found murdered in a hotel room. Piper discovers Hall's killer, but the case takes a bizarre turn when someone steals the corpse's head from the city morgue—apparently in an attempt to hide the fact that Hall was drugged at the time of his death.

Learning from Tommy One-Eye that Bruno is once more running the rackets from a secret hideout, Piper arranges to meet Sammy Sargent, Bruno's chief aide. Buying time for his boss, Sammy fingers another of the six—bank robber Jack Larner, a master of disguise—and Piper captures him at

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the local airport. But there seems no connection among the men except theatrical agent Marc Litzen, who keeps reappearing in the case.

Then Piper tracks down the fourth escaped prisoner, con man Hugh Courtney, who fleeced people while posing as a bishop. Piper clears him of a murder charge. Piper is summoned to New York by his wife Jennie, an old friend of the fifth escapee, Kate Gallery. In attempting to learn why Kate Gallery killed her husband, he succeeds in tying her to a second killing.

But returning to the county jail with the former model and actress, Piper broods over something she has said. He concludes that the prisoner-escape could only have been carried out by Sheriff Barker. He goes up to Barker's office in the darkened jail building. . .

Only Nick Bruno, the King, remains at large, and Piper has the feeling that Sheriff Barker can tell him just where the King's castle is. Piper pushes open the door and faces the man behind the desk. "Barker, I've come—"

He moves closer and sees that Barker isn't listening. Something—an icepick—has gone in under his ribs and probably hit his heart. Sheriff Barker is dead. . .

The morning was gloomy with clouds and depression. A slushy snowfall had brought traffic almost to a halt and Piper watched the cars creeping along from the window of Inspector Fleming's office. It was too early for snow, too early for winter.

"You're certain Barker was involved?" Fleming asked irritably. He'd been asking the same question all night, but he still wasn't satisfied with the answer.

"He's dead, isn't he? To me, that's proof enough. Six people escaped from that prison van. Barker picked them, Barker put them there, and only Barker knew who would be in that van. The newspapers were right in attacking him, but they had the wrong reason. He wasn't incompetent, he was crooked."

Fleming scratched at the bristles of his beard. There had been no time for either of them to shave. "I still can't believe it of Barker. I've known the man for years. What could he hope to gain?"

"Money. It's the oldest motive in the world. Someone paid him and then killed him, possibly because he was getting cold feet about the whole thing."

"Who?"

Piper shrugged. "Nick Bruno is the only one left."

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Inspector Fleming nodded. "The only one left, like in that Agatha Christie novel. So where do we find him?"

"That's my job," Piper said. "I've gotten the others and I'll get him. First I want you to tell me everything you know about Bruno."

Fleming slipped a folder from his desk and dumped the photos of the six escapees on top, along with their record sheets.

"Is that him?" Piper asked, indicating a half-hidden picture.

Fleming uncovered the top of the head. "No, that's Charlie Hall, our dead man. This is Bruno, with the hair. Nasty-looking character, isn't he?"

Piper studied the face, remembering it now from the newspaper photos. "You said earlier that he'd never been convicted here before."

"That's right. In fact, his arrest record was clean in Raker County until this arson charge—hiring those two guys to burn down one of his own restaurants for the insurance. Of course everyone knew of his Mafia connections. He's their top man in this area, even though his non-Sicilian parentage keeps him from actually heading a Mafia 'family.' He's an odd sort of man—fairly ordinary features, except for that nasty look in his eyes. They say he's worth more than ten million dollars, much more, and he doesn't even have a family to inherit it."

"Never been married?"

"His wife and daughter were killed in an auto accident about twenty years ago. He never remarried, just devoted all his time to building his underworld kingdom. There's a brother somewhere out west, but they never see each other. I understand the brother's quite respectable—an insurance executive."

"I've got his age down as fifty-five," Piper said, checking his own notes. "And you say he came here about twenty years ago?"

Inspector Fleming nodded. "From the midwest, right after the car accident. He'd had a few minor arrests out there, but there's been nothing since he came east. We know, however, that he controls most of the traffic in hard drugs in this state, and a good deal of gambling as well. His only real drug competition comes from the Cuban crowd in New York. Believe me, we were happy to nail him on an arson charge."

"According to my informants, he's running things from a secret headquarters now. Visitors are taken there blindfolded. Any idea where it might be?"

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"It might be anywhere. He bought up a lot of land in the county over the years, for possible future restaurants. Probably the only one who knows is his right-hand man, Sammy Sargent, and of course he's not talking."

Piper nodded. "I've met Sammy. He put me on to Larner, the bank robber, apparently to buy time for Bruno. You're right. Sammy's a tough customer, not the talking kind. You think it was Sammy who arranged the prison-van escape?"

"It almost had to be, though I think he was pressured into it by the New York Mafia families. Sammy was doing all right running things in Bruno's absence, and I don't think it was his idea to put the king back on the throne. Still, Sammy's got to be your link if you're going after Bruno. All you have to do now then is find Sammy."

"He's missing too?"

"If you're right about Barker's involvement he might very well go under cover. Sammy was always Bruno's triggerman, according to the rumors."

"Triggerman and icepick man?"

Fleming nodded. "Watch your step. These guys are playing for keeps now."

"So am I," Piper said.

Susan was busy at her typewriter when he walked into the office. She glanced up. "You look like you had a hard night."

"I did. Any calls?"

"Nothing that can't wait. I heard on the radio about Sheriff Barker."

"Yeah."

"You should get some rest."

He glanced at the morning mail. "No time now."

He was heading for the door again when she called out, "Be careful!"

"That's what everybody keeps telling me."

He drove down to the Winking Moon, the bar at which he usually met Tommy, the one-eyed informer who was his best underworld contact. The slush had melted by now, and the sun was making a feeble effort to break through the clouds. Perhaps it would be a good day after all.

He'd been sitting in the back booth for nearly an hour before Tommy finally ambled in, joking with the bartender as he picked up a beer and moved toward the back. "Too bad about the Sheriff," he said, sliding in opposite Piper.

"Damned bad. The lid's blown off this thing now."

"You think it's linked to the escape?"

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"I'm sure of it. I think Barker set up the whole thing, tipped off the gang, and made sure the right prisoners were in that van."

"So what do you do now that he's dead?"

"I want Sammy Sargent."

The one-eyed man shook his head. "No can do. He's dropped out of sight."

"I was afraid of that."

"The word is he's holed up with Bruno at their secret headquarters."

"Which is where?"

"If I knew it would be no secret."

"There must be some word out. You know his boys."

Tommy frowned at his beer. "Not any more. Bruno's been getting rid of the old crowd, shipping them off to other cities. He's bringing in a whole new crew, except for Sammy."

"Why would he do that?"

"The restaurant fire was bungled, and he almost went to the pen for it. He probably doesn't want any more slipups like that."

Piper sighed. "I need him, Tommy. I need Bruno, and the only way to get him is through Sargent. I have to find out where they are. You said some people had been taken up there blindfolded. Who are they?"

Tommy thought about it. "Well, one of them was that theatrical agent, Marc Litzen."

David Piper cursed softly. "Litzen again! He keeps turning up in this case like a bad penny! What's his connection with Nick Bruno?"

"The way I hear it, Litzen was picked up outside his office one night last week and taken there for no reason. He got the full treatment—blindfold and all. Bruno talked to him for a while about his theatrical activities and then let him go."

"Strange," Piper agreed. "But it's worth checking on." He slipped a folded bill across the table. "Anything else?"

"I'll keep my ears open."

"Good. Do that. I think we're getting close to the end now. Close to Bruno."

David Piper drove across town and parked his car in the lot next to Marc Litzen's building. He hadn't really liked the agent from the first time he'd met him, and he was ready to believe almost anything about him. Obviously Litzen wasn't about to admit the real reason he'd been summoned to the king's presence.

He entered the glass-sided building and rode up in the elevator to Litzen's floor. The beefy man was alone in his office, studying a contract through his thick eyeglasses. "Hello, Litzen," he said, not

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bothering to sound friendly.

"Well! It's David Piper again, isn't it? Still looking for your convicts?"

"Just one convict now. Just Nick Bruno."

"Sorry I can't help you." He went back to reading the contract.

"But I think you can. I understand you visited him recently."

Litzen's face went white. "That's not true!"

"I think it is. You were taken there blindfolded and you had a long meeting with Bruno about his narcotics interests."

"Narcotics! I don't know anything about that! He didn't even mention narcotics!"

David Piper smiled. "Then you admit you saw him."

"Damn you, Piper!"

"Just answer my questions and you'll stay out of trouble."

The beefy man removed his glasses and wiped his forehead. "I don't know a thing. I really don't."

"Where did they take you?"

"I don't know. Two men stopped me outside this building last week and said Bruno wanted to see me. They said to come along and I wouldn't be hurt. Well, I had no choice, so I went with them. In the car they removed my glasses and blindfolded me. We drove for a long time—it seemed like an hour—and then they took me out of the car and led me into a building of some sort."

"Where?"

"I told you I don't know!"

"You must know if it was the city or the country."

"The country. It was very quiet. And there was snow on the ground."

"Snow?"

"Hard-packed. I had to walk on it, and my feet got damp."

"Hard-packed snow at this time of the year? All we've had is wet slush in the city."

"That's why I'm telling you it was in the country."

"All right," Piper sighed. "What about the building?"

"I don't know. They took me up some stairs and into a room. When they removed the blindfold I was in a large office. The windows were covered with heavy drapes and the lights were dim. They didn't give me back my glasses and I couldn't see very well."

"Who was there?"

"Nick Bruno and another man. Sammy something."

"Sammy Sargent. Go on."

"Bruno was sitting behind his desk, wearing dark glasses. He didn't say much, just asked me about some of my clients."

"Joe Reilly's wife?"

"Yes, and others. He asked questions, but he didn't really

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want to know anything. I don't know what he wanted. At one point he got up from his desk and came over close to me. I could smell his breath. He said to keep my nose clean if I wanted to stay alive. Then he told the men to take me back to town."

"They blindfolded you again?"

"Yes. And that's all I know."

"Think! There must be something else."

He thought. "Not really," he said at last. "Just one little thing. I said it was in the country, and I'm sure it was. But as I was leaving I could hear voices off in the distance, and what sounded like machinery."

"Machinery? A factory?"

"No, just a noise. Steady, but not too loud. A machine of some sort."

"And nothing else was said on the way back?"

"No. Nothing."

"You have no idea why they brought you to Bruno?"

"None."

"Were you supposed to be somewhere else at the time? Were they keeping you from something, an appointment of some sort?"

"No." He shook his head, honestly puzzled.

"And you told people about this?"

"Just a few close friends."

But the word had got to Tommy, and on to Piper. "All right," he said at last. "I believe you." And, strangely enough, he did.

Piper telephoned the weather bureau from his office and talked to the chief meteorologist. "David Piper," he identified himself. "From the Department of Apprehension."

"The Manhunter. I've been reading about you."

"I hope you can help me. I want to know where within an hour's drive from here there was snow on the ground last week. Late last week."

The man on the phone grunted. "That's easy. Nowhere. The temperatures were below freezing, but there was nothing more than a few snow flurries till the last couple of days. Even today it's pretty well melted already. This early in the season—"

"The snow was described as hard-packed."

"No, nothing. The nearest snow like that would be somewhere up in Canada, a good four hours away."

Piper thanked him and hung up. It looked like another dead end. Marc Litzen had lied about the snow, or else he had mistaken something else for

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snow. But what does one mistake for snow?

"Susan, bring me all the records on this case, will you? I want to go over everything."

She pulled out file folders and the raft of notes he'd dictated to her, and brought them to him. He spent the next two hours poring over everything that had happened, from the beginning. Looking at their faces in the photographs and reading the reports, it all came back to him. Pawn Joe Reilly, married to an actress but leading a double life as an art forger. Rook Charlie Hall, the swindler who'd been murdered in a hotel room and then had his head stolen from the morgue. Knight Jack Larner, the bank robber who was a master of disguise. Bishop Hugh Courtney, the con-man who'd turned out not to be a killer after all. Queen Kate Gallery, the sometime actress and model who'd killed two men.

These, along with King Nick Bruno, had made up the six. Five men and one woman who had played against the odds, and with Sheriff Barker's help had almost got away with it. He studied their faces, and especially the face of the man he still sought, Nick Bruno.

The king.

Like a chess game.

The king.

Could it be . . .?

Could it be that the game was not chess? That it was checkers?

"Mr. Piper, your wife is here."

He glanced up, distracted, and saw Jennie already entering the office, stepping around the uncertain Susan. Jennie was not one to wait on formalities.

"What brings you up from New York?" he asked, trying to sort out the thoughts racing through his mind.

"Some early-season skiing. I couldn't pass through Raker County without saying hello to my husband."

"Thanks for the sarcasm." She was wearing the powder-blue stretch pants and jacket he had given her last Christmas. It was the only one of his gifts she had really seemed to like. Most clothes she designed herself.

"I'm sorry to be bitchy, David, but that was a mean trick yesterday. I called you down to help poor Kate and you ended up involving her in a second murder."

"I'm sorry too. But she killed them both. You don't let people like that just walk around loose."

"I know, but—"

"Skiing, did you say? You're going skiing?"

"Yes. What's wrong with that?"

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"What little snow we've got is just about melted."

"Snowflake Mountain makes its own. They've been open since last week."

He sat very still. "Makes its own snow? You mean, a snow-making machine?"

"Of course. What's so strange about that?"

"How long a drive is it up there?"

"Oh, close to an hour, I suppose. It's at the northern end of the county. If you'd ever gone skiing with me you'd know."

"Darling, I'm going with you right now! Come on!"

He'd never been up to Snowflake Mountain before, and he was surprised at the spacious grandeur of the place. The ski slope itself, lighted for night use, stretched up toward the sky. It was high enough to frighten even a veteran, Piper thought. But his main interest was not the slope but the large circular lodge at its base. One part housed a ski rental shop, while another held a cafeteria. Upstairs there were a dining room and cocktail lounge. He hadn't bothered to check, but he would have bet the restaurant was owned by one of Nick Bruno's dummy corporations.

"Find what you expected?" Jennie asked him, unlocking her skis from the car's rear deck.

Piper didn't answer at once. A pie-shaped segment of the ski lodge remained in darkness, its windows covered. Offices, he supposed, and yet the space covered both floors—fully a third of the building. Maybe too much for just offices. More the size of a headquarters. It was on the side away from the approach to the slopes, where no skiers were likely to notice a blindfolded man being led in or out.

But the man-made snow extended this far, he noticed, apparently as protection for skiers who overshot the base of the slope. And it was hard-packed snow, as Litzen had said, tramped down by feet and skis. Standing here, off to one side, Piper closed his eyes and listened. Young people talking in the distance, and—what else? Machinery, surely. He opened his eyes and saw that it was the ski lift, making a steady, machinelike hum as its endless cable snaked around the bottom and started back up the slope.

Yes, this was the place. Marc Litzen had not lied.

"Jennie, I don't trust the phone here. Take the car and drive back to that last gas station we passed. Call Inspector Fleming at this number

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and tell him I think I've found Nick Bruno. Tell him I may need help."

"All right. But where are you going?"

"Inside, to look around."

She paused for just a minute. "Be careful, David. Don't do anything foolish."

He grinned reassuringly. "Only my job."

Then she was gone, and he pushed by some giggling girls in stretch pants to enter the lodge. The inside was modernistic in the extreme, with a décor of vibrant colors and wall posters designed to appeal to the younger patrons. Piper took it all in as he moved through the sprinkling of skiers in their heavy boots and made his way upstairs. Here, in the cocktail lounge, the talk was more subdued. The hour was still early, and no one had done much drinking. Most of the customers sat with their half-empty glasses before them, watching the tiny black figures as they streaked and weaved down the slope. Occasionally, when someone took a fall, there would be a little gasp or a chuckle.

"Where's the office?" Piper asked the bartender.

"Around back, through that door."

Piper nodded and followed directions. He found himself in a narrow corridor that led toward the darkened third of the lodge that he had observed from outside. His fingers strayed to the gun beneath his coat, and he wondered if he was right.

Not chess. Checkers.

The king . . .

"Freeze, Piper!"

He felt the chill barrel of a gun press against his neck as a hand darted around to pull his own weapon free. It was Sammy Sargent, ready and waiting for him

"You expected me, Sammy?"

"We got closed-circuit TV at every entrance. Bruno leaves nothing to chance." He pushed the gun barrel a bit harder into Piper's neck. "Straight ahead, and no tricks."

David Piper went through the door at the end of the hall, a thick padded entrance that led into a large, obviously soundproofed, room. The windows were hung with drapes, and no hint of the outside could be seen or heard. It was decorated a bit like a living room, complete with fireplace, and only the large businesslike desk at one end shattered the illusion.

Behind the desk, Nick Bruno turned and smiled, his dark glasses catching the flash of light from above. "Welcome to

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the spider's web, Mr. Piper."

"So we meet at last."

Bruno ran a hand through his thick graying hair. "It's all my pleasure. I've been reading about the fabulous Manhunter. Tracked down all five of them, didn't you?"

"Six," Piper corrected, "counting yourself."

Sammy had stepped away, but he still kept the gun trained at Piper's middle. "Well, you'll never get a chance to collect on Number Six, Manhunter. You're going out of here in a box."

"How did you find this place?" Bruno asked. "Did one of your pigeons know about it?"

"No, but you had Marc Litzen up here. That was a mistake, even though I realize why you had to do it."

Jennie had been gone ten minutes, and they didn't know about her. If he could only keep them talking long enough, he had a chance.

"Litzen?" Nick Bruno frowned. "Where does he fit in?"

"Cut the clowning, Nick. I know the whole setup. I know the reason for the mass escape. I know all about the big caper."

"What big caper?"

"The biggest one of all, Nick. You really think you can live the rest of your life in hiding like this? You think you can rule a good portion of the Mafia's upstate empire without ever leaving this building?"

"Men like Howard Hughes rule business empires," Sammy Sargent pointed out. "Some South American dictators never leave their palaces. He's doing it too. He's been doing it ever since the escape. He lives downstairs and he runs things from up here. Our men are all new, trusted, loyal. There's no chance of a slipup."

"There was a slipup with Sheriff Barker," Piper reminded them.

Sammy moved uneasily. "Barker got greedy."

"You killed him?"

"Sure, I killed him. Protecting Nick's interests."

Piper turned back to Nick Bruno. "And now you'll kill me."

Bruno was frowning at him. "What big caper, I asked you! How much do you know?"

"He knows nothing!" Sammy spat.

"I know everything."

"Then talk."

Piper's mind was racing. If Fleming came with his siren on he could be here in another half hour. If he could only keep them talking . . .

"It was the biggest caper of all, bigger than any bank robbery. There were millions of

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dollars involved, and you pulled it off without anybody even knowing. That was the clever part. A master crime that nobody even knew happened."

Bruno leaned forward, his knuckles white against the desk top. "What crime are you talking about, Piper?"

"The murder of a Mafia leader and his replacement with an imposter. The real Nick Bruno died in that hotel room. You are Charlie Hall."

"Let me kill him now," Sammy Sargent said. "He knows too much!"

"No!" the man behind the desk barked. "Let him tell us just what he knows, and how he knows it!"

"Gladly," Piper said. Talking—he had to keep talking. "There were Six Points—or Six Clues, if you prefer. Point Number One: the escape from the prison van. Sheriff Barker was obviously involved, since only he would have known who would be in that van. Only he could have ordered the girl sent along, forcing one guard to ride inside with the prisoners. But more than that—in describing what happened inside the van, Hugh Courtney told me that Charlie Hall jumped the guard as soon as the van was hit. This was a closed prison van, remember. Charlie Hall could have had no way of knowing, in those first few seconds, that it was anything more than a minor traffic accident. He was not a killer, and he was in for a relatively light sentence.

"And yet in that first instant Hall sprang at the guard and started choking him. Courtney said they had no prior knowledge of the escape, and yet Charlie Hall must have had that prior knowledge. So both he and Sheriff Barker must have known what to expect."

"Very clever. Keep talking."

"Point Number Two: the supposed murder of Charlie Hall. Were we really supposed to believe that Hall would voluntarily seek a hiding place in a hotel where the room clerk was a man he had swindled? Even if the man didn't kill him, he might easily have betrayed Hall to the police. That, plus the evidence of sleeping pills found in the body, convinced me that the killing had been arranged. Hall went there *knowing* the room clerk would probably try to kill him. Why? Did it make any sense at all?

"Yes, it made sense if added to the fact that Hall was part of the original escape plot. The clerk entered a darkened room and fired at a man in a bed who looked like Charlie Hall. There was a back entrance to the hotel, remember, and it was

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easy to bring the drugged victim up while Hall escaped the same way. And there was no reason for the room clerk to suspect anything. After all, he'd talked to the real Charlie Hall. He knew Hall was in that room, in that bed."

"Hall and Bruno look nothing alike," Sammy Sargent said, but his voice was cracking.

"That's where you're wrong, as you well know. Point Three: the substitution. I suppose it was Sheriff Barker who first noticed the resemblance between his two prisoners and mentioned it to you, Sammy. You had a grip on Bruno's Mafia rackets, and you wanted it to stay that way. You didn't want to give everything up when Bruno got out of prison. So you and Barker worked the thing out together.

"You approached Charlie Hall, and he was all for it. Why not, huh, Charlie? They get you out of prison and set you up as head of the multimillion-dollar business. When you got tired of it you could always skip out and start a new life, loaded, with Charlie Hall dead and buried. So the three of you were in it together—Hall and Sargent and Barker. The other gunmen were hired for the escape and then paid off big and shipped to South America."

"And how did we kill the real Bruno?" the man behind the desk asked.

"When the six convicts split up, two to a car, Bruno and Hall were together. A couple of people told me that. Sammy met the car and slipped some sleeping pills to the real Bruno. You kept him drugged till it was time for Hall to register at the hotel. Of course you couldn't be certain the room clerk would murder the man who had swindled him, but it was a chance worth taking. If it hadn't worked, you'd have killed Bruno yourselves.

"I noticed this morning in Inspector Fleming's office that Bruno and Hall looked something alike. In fact, when he had the top of Hall's head covered in a photo, I mistook it for Bruno. Both in their fifties, both with ordinary-looking faces. The big difference between them was Bruno's hair and Hall's baldness. That and Bruno's nasty eyes. The eyes didn't matter with a dead man, so you simply shaved off all of Nick Bruno's hair after you'd drugged him. The room clerk saw a bald, sleeping man, and killed him. The first police on the scene weren't all that certain of the identification—until the fingerprints checked out. The corpse seemed to have Charlie Hall's fingerprints."

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"How'd we get around that, smart guy? Fingerprints don't lie."

"But in this case they did. It was the key to the whole scheme, really, and Sheriff Barker's major contribution to the plan. I was visiting him one day and he told me he sometimes had to refingerprint prisoners when the prints smudged. Now, Bruno had never before been arrested in this county, so there were no prints of his on file. I think Barker simply destroyed the first fingerprint cards and called both Hall and Bruno down from their cells to be printed again.

"Then, as he was fingerprinting them, he simply *switched cards*—putting Bruno's name on Hall's card and Hall's name on Bruno's card. It would have been a cinch to do. Hall was in on the substitution, of course, and Bruno would hardly be expected to notice it. Of course the fingerprint cards sent off to Washington had to be correct, because Washington had earlier prints on file. Only the ones needed here had to be switched—to positively identify the corpse as Charlie Hall."

"You can prove this, Piper?"

"The prints on file in Washington will prove it. Which brings me to Point Number Four: could Hall live the life of Bruno? He certainly could, with Sammy Sargent here to guide him through every move. Bruno's wife and child were dead. He had no other relatives except a brother he never saw. The first thing you did was to get rid of all the old gang members and hire new ones, and that alone made me suspicious.

"The only persons who saw Bruno were brought here blindfolded. None of them knew him well. You had a perfect excuse for this new way of life—you were in hiding from the police. Even your Mafia bosses wouldn't question that. In a year or so, when you were more used to the role, Charlie, you might even venture down to New York.

"The big test was having Marc Litzen up here. He didn't know Bruno too well, but he sure knew Charlie Hall. You had to see if he'd recognize you. Of course his glasses were off and you wore dark ones to hide the different-colored eyes, but you still had to test your voice. You didn't talk much, but if Litzen had tumbled to the truth he never would have left this room alive. He didn't tumble, so you figured you were safe."

"You've built quite a case, Manhunter." The glasses came off now, and also the shaggy

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gray wig. He was Charlie Hall, bald, middle-aged swindler. The rook, pulling his greatest swindle. "Too bad you'll never leave here to tell anyone."

How long had he been talking? A half hour? Piper went on. "Point Number Five: the nature of the six escapees. Of course Barker had to supply other prisoners for the escape in addition to you and Nick Bruno, just to divert attention from you two. Any law officer, looking at just two photographs, might notice the similar features. Six provided four red herrings.

"I've already explained why the girl was necessary to the mechanics of the escape, but something else occurred to me, as it must have occurred to Sheriff Barker. He needed four red herrings, so whom did he pick? He wanted to mask the substitution, to divert attention from the impersonation, but the four he picked did just the opposite.

"You don't see it? Well, look at it this way. Joe Reilly and Jack Larner and Hugh Courtney and Kate Gallery—all were impersonators themselves! Reilly was married to an actress and led a double life as an art-gallery manager. Larner was a master of disguises that he used in robbing banks. Courtney was a con man who pretended to be a bishop. And Kate Gallery was an off-Broadway actress who, unknown to Barker, had dressed as a man to kill someone.

"Barker hoped these four would muddy the waters if we ever began to suspect an impersonation of some sort. But all they really did was draw attention to the other two—the two non-impersonators, Bruno and Hall."

Charlie Hall nodded and reached into the desk drawer and brought out another gun. "You've talked so much that you must have laryngitis, Piper. Now say your prayers."

Time. He needed time.

"Sammy couldn't just kill Bruno, because then the Mafia bosses would have sent someone else up to take over, or divided the rackets among other bosses. No, the king had to live on. At first I thought of it as a chess game, but it was really checkers. The other five weren't protecting the king, as in chess. Instead it was like checkers, where the man who crosses the board to the opposite side actually becomes a king! That's what you did, Charlie. You were crowned king, just like in checkers. I was chasing will-o'-the-wisps all along, and I forgot that Will-o'-the-Wisp is the name for a traditional opening move in checkers.

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"Point Number Six: the stolen head. Why did—"

Then the lights went out.

Piper didn't wait to ask why. Guided by the flickering glow from the fireplace, he threw himself sideways into Sammy Sargent just as Hall fired. He went down on top of Sargent, clawing for the gun, as Hall fired a second time. Then Piper had the gun in his hand, felt the sweaty metal, and rolled free. Charlie Hall fired again and Sargent screamed in agony.

"You shot the wrong one, Charlie. Drop the gun!"

There was a crash against the padded door and it started to give way. Hall ran forward, silhouetted against the firelight, and Piper shot him in the leg.

Then the door burst open and Inspector Fleming was there, with a half-dozen state police. "You all right?"

Piper kicked the gun from Hall's fingers and pinned the wounded man to the floor. "I'm all right, but I think Sargent's dead."

The lights came back on again. "I saw the closed-circuit TV," Inspector Fleming explained. "This was the only quick way I knew to get past it. We turned off the power out at the highway." He looked down at the wounded man. "I'll be damned! That can't be Charlie Hall!"

"It can and is. I'll tell you about it on the way back. Where's Jennie?"

"Out in the car."

He went down to her then, feeling good. "You darned fool," she said. "Almost got yourself killed, didn't you?"

"Almost. Move over, I'll drive."

Sometime later, after he'd listened to all the explanations, Fleming asked, "Why did they steal Bruno's head from the morgue, after the body had already been identified as Charlie Hall's?"

"Because they forgot that the body would remain there unclaimed for several days," Piper said. "Most morticians will say it's not true, but there remains a strong belief that in some individuals the hair continues to grow for a few days after death. True or not, Sammy and Hall couldn't take a chance on any hair beginning to sprout on that supposedly bald head. Hair would have told us at once that the corpse wasn't really Charlie Hall, and then we might have figured out the switch in the fingerprint cards. So Sammy went down and stole the head, just to be safe."

After that there was no more to say, and David Piper went home to his apartment. He was tired, but he hoped that Jennie would decide to stay over.

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This is the first story to appear in the United States by an up-and-coming Australian writer . . .

HOT ROOF IN SYDNEY

by JOHN P. GILDERS

Boyd Stevens cursed the heat. It was so hot that he had to get a wet cloth, damp down the seat of his car, and wipe the steering wheel.

The car had been standing in the sun all morning, and now it was an oven. He opened all the windows and tried to circulate a little air.

Boyd Stevens cursed Martin Jarrett. Why did he want to make the payoff at 9:00 A.M. on Good Friday? It was irreligious. Not that Boyd had any time for religion. He was a bookmaker, and the nearest he got to praying was when the favorite shot to the front at Randwick and looked like it would stay the distance.

Boyd was in his late thirties, a little on the stout side. He had a pleasant face, but tiny red capillaries spread in spidery lines from his ears. His eyes were blue, and could be steel-cold.

Especially when dealing with a character like Martin Jarrett. Boyd grunted as the steam rose up from the seat cover. He wiped the cover again with the wet cloth, feeling perspiration run down inside his open-necked shirt.

Martin Jarrett owed him $35,000. He should never had let him get in so deep. But Jarrett had always been a big bettor, and had a solid reputation all over town. He had always paid up promptly in the past.

This time Jarrett had gone over his limit. Thirty-five thousand was a lot of money and Boyd had become worried about it. He had phoned Jarrett a dozen times at his office—but Jarrett was always conveniently out.

Martin Jarrett was Treasurer of Alliance Insurance Company, Ltd. He mixed with high society and his name often appeared in the social pages of the newspapers. He was the playboy type, thirtyish, good-looking, born with a silver spoon, and had the right family connections.

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Boyd had finally caught Jarrett outside his office last night. He had buttonholed him straight away.

"How about it, Martin? You've owed me thirty-five grand for three months. I'm not a bank, you know. I've got to have the cash."

Martin Jarrett looked startled. Then he regained his composure.

"I'll phone you tonight, old chap. I promise. I'm in a hurry now, but you have no need to worry at all."

Sure enough, Jarrett had phoned late last night. He sounded a little excited. "Boyd, old chap, can you come to my place early tomorrow morning, and we'll fix up that business. You know where I live."

Yes, Boyd knew where Martin Jarrett lived. And so did everybody who was anybody in town. Jarrett had the top floor of the Ajax Building, a 52-story tower in the heart of Sydney. It was an apartment superb, with a tremendous view of the metropolis, in the tallest building in the city. He lived alone, had a part-time cook and a woman who came in to do the cleaning.

Boyd Stevens wiped his brow with a handkerchief. Good lord, it was hot. He picked up last night's paper from the car seat.

Heat wave! the headline screamed; *No relief for several days. Temperature at 3:00* P.M. *was 102°.*

"Phew!" Boyd breathed. "I'll bet it's over a hundred right now, and it's only 8:30 in the morning."

Gingerly he climbed into the car. He felt the seat cover burn his legs. He wore blue and white checked shorts and a thin open-necked blue shirt. He put the wet rag under his thighs for protection.

He started the car, then drove out onto the main road. He headed for the city. In the distance the Ajax Building soared over the skyline, a thin tower of aluminum and glass glittering brightly in the blazing sun.

Boyd found it easy to park. "It's like Sunday," he muttered. "Nobody around at all."

The city was deserted. The blistering heat had driven everybody out of town. The pavements shimmered like a furnace, the road was a steaming glossy black.

Boyd got out of the car and walked into the lobby of the Ajax Building. He stepped into an elevator, pressed the button for the 52nd floor.

A minute later he stood outside the door of Martin Jarrett's top-floor apartment.

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"Hullo, old boy! Hullo! Come inside."

Jarrett was dressed in gray pants and an open-necked pink shirt which had a pattern of flowers. His black hair was slicked back, smooth and neat. His thin face broke into a beaming smile, showing gold-filled teeth. He smoked a cigarette from a long holder. His eyes were gray, shrewdly alight.

"Hot enough for you, old boy? I can't *ever* remember it being as hot as this. Easter too. It's phenomenal!"

"You can say that again," Boyd said, wiping his brow. The cool air-conditioning was a relief from the hot air outside. He took a cigarette from Jarrett and sat down on a luxurious sofa.

"Drink?" Jarrett asked cheerfully.

"Thanks—I'll have a beer."

"Any particular brand? I've got an assortment here."

"K.B. will do."

"Okay."

Jarrett poured the beer, looking shrewdly at his visitor.

Boyd sensed there was something on his mind. He wondered if he had the cash, if he could afford to write out a check for $35,000.

"How about the dough?" Boyd asked bluntly.

Jarrett looked startled. "No need to rush into business right away, old chap. We'll get around to that."

"I don't like wasting time. Can you give me a check? Right now?"

Jarrett bit his lip; his brow furrowed. He handed a tall glass of foaming beer to Boyd who took it and swallowed half of it thirstily.

"You are a man who likes straight talk. I can see that, and I admire you for it," Jarrett said. "However, I have a few problems at the present time."

"Oh?" Boyd frowned. "I have 35,000 problems, all big ones."

"Your joke!" Jarrett grinned. But his eyes were cold. He looked at Boyd hard. "As I was saying, I have a few problems. With the company. You understand?"

Boyd stared at Jarrett. Boyd was tense now, his mind ticking. "With the company?" he queried.

"Yes, with the company. I'll need a little time."

"How much?"

"Six months."

"Sorry. As I told you before, I'm not a bank. I operate strictly on a thirty-day basis. I never give credit beyond that—not to anyone."

"You don't understand. I'm in real trouble. There's a matter of certain loans from the

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company which have to be replaced."

Boyd glared at Jarrett, his eyes blue pinpoints of steel. He could see it all now. Jarrett had been using his company's money for gambling. It was the old, old story. He put his empty glass on the small table next to him and stood up.

"Now look here, Jarrett. I'm not interested in your personal problems. All I know is that you have played on your reputation, and you owe me $35,000. Everybody says you are a gentleman. Your reputation is one hundred percent. I wouldn't want to hurt that. But I've got to have that thirty-five grand, as I'm in trouble myself. I owe money too. I also have a reputation—with the other bookmakers in town.

"If you've been fiddling with your company's books, that's your business. In fact, it's all the more reason why I should get my money in a hurry. You might be found out, then where would I be? Out on a limb, properly!"

Boyd's face was red when he stopped talking. His hands trembled slightly. His lips were drawn tight, his blue eyes brittle. He was beginning to hate Martin Jarrett and his double-crossing ways. This man might owe hundreds of thousands of dollars to his company. Boyd would have to hit him quick, and hit him hard.

"And that's final!" Boyd added savagely.

"Now, now," Jarrett soothed. "No need to get so upset. We can talk this over like gentlemen. Something can be worked out, I'm sure."

"There's nothing to be worked out. I want a check for $35,000. That's all."

"I can't give you $35,000."

Boyd looked grim. He grabbed the beer bottle angrily, poured out another beer. He downed it in one long swallow. His mouth was dry.

"How much can you give me?"

"Ten thousand dollars on account. But I can't give you that until after the Easter holiday."

"Ten thousand dollars?"

Boyd frowned. Ten thousand dollars was better than nothing. Even if he had to wait a few days for it. It was obvious now he couldn't get the whole amount from Jarrett. Probably Jarrett owed money all around town. Better to go along with him and make sure of the $10,000, then hit him again next week.

Boyd nodded his head slowly. "Okay," he said gruffly. "Ten thousand dollars on Tuesday."

"Not Tuesday. I've got to

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make a few bank transfers. It'll take a couple of days to clear the checks. Say, Friday for sure. You can come to my office Friday morning, ten A.M., and I'll give you a check you can cash at the bank immediately for $10,000. How about that?"

Boyd swallowed, felt his mouth go dry again. Even in this air-conditioned luxury apartment the heat seemed to dehydrate the air.

"Okay," he said slowly. "Friday—ten A.M."

"Good—very good!" Jarrett said easily. He smiled. "Now that our business is settled—what do you think of my apartment?"

Boyd walked around the apartment, inspected the low-slung furniture of the very latest design. The windows were heavily curtained to keep out the blazing sun. An ivy-like plant crawled up a lattice work beside the built-in bar. Thick gray carpet lay deep on the floor. A white bearskin rug sprawled near an imitation fireplace. The apartment was the last word in luxury.

"How much did you pay for this?" Boyd asked.

"One hundred thousand dollars."

"Huh! Company funds, I suppose."

"No," Jarrett smiled. "I'll let you in on a little secret. It's not mine. The apartment belongs to the company. They look after their executives, y'know."

"I can see that," Boyd said, surprised. He wondered why Jarrett was confiding in him.

"Come up on the roof and I'll show you the view. It's really something—the best view in Sydney."

Jarrett walked to the door, Boyd following. A short hallway from the elevator led to half a dozen steps. At the top of the steps was a heavy steel door.

Jarrett unlocked the door and Boyd felt the hot blast of air from outside. Both men walked out onto the roof. It was flat, surrounded by a wall about four feet high. An enclosed water tank reared up from the center. Four TV antennas jutted up from the wall.

Boyd mopped his brow and walked to the wall. The view was magnificent—the great panorama of Sydney Harbor.

"Good lord, but it's hot!" Boyd said. "It must be a hundred and thirty up here."

He turned as he spoke, but Jarrett was nowhere to be seen. He heard a thud as the heavy steel door closed.

"Too hot for him," Boyd muttered. "And it's too bloody hot for me too."

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Boyd reached the door and pulled. It remained closed. He hammered with his fist.

"Come on, Jarrett!" he shouted. "You've had your little joke."

The door was locked from inside.

Boyd hammered again, felt the concrete floor of the roof like a hot plate under his feet. Still no answer. Boyd was hostile now. He pounded angrily on the door.

After a few moments it dawned on him. Jarrett wasn't playing any joke. It was Good Friday, 9:30 A.M. Nobody would be in town until next Tuesday. He was all alone on the roof. Four days! Without water in this stifling heat! It was a new kind of murder—

"Oh, my God!" he screamed, kicking at the door. "You swine! You filthy swine!"

The sun beat down with unrelenting fury, burned at the concrete floor. It sent heat waves skittering and dancing across the roof.

Boyd didn't know it, but his guess was almost right.

The temperature on the roof was 135°.

Boyd stopped hammering on the door and rubbed his bruised feet.

"I've got to think," he muttered.

He felt the hot sun sear the back of his neck, the sweat run down his chest. He walked to the wall, peered down to the street 52 stories below.

A few people dodged quickly in and out of the sun, but the city was almost deserted.

Boyd waved anxiously, but nobody looked up.

"A message!" he panted, feeling in his pockets. He had no pencil or paper. He was dressed only in shorts and shirt. Desperately he searched for an idea.

A man was hurrying down the street toward the Ajax Building. Boyd ripped off the bottom of his shirt and held it over the wall.

He estimated the rate of fall of the cloth and the man's progress. He rolled the cloth into a ball, paused, then let go.

The blue shirt tail fluttered down slowly in the still air. The man stopped, surprised, as it drifted to the pavement. He bent down, picked it up. He examined it curiously, then looked up.

Boyd leaned out as far as he could from the wall. He waved violently, yelled with all his strength, but his voice failed to carry to the street below.

The man waved back, grinning. He threw the shirt tail into the gutter and went on his way.

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Boyd fell back, exhausted. His eyes stung as sweat ran from his forehead. He walked around the roof, his tongue already a rasp in his throat.

He thought of the cool beer in Jarrett's apartment and a great hatred rose within him.

"Swine!" he gritted.

Boyd examined the water tank. It was all steel and completely enclosed. It offered no shade at all, and it was too hot to touch.

He stood in the blazing sun and wondered how long he could survive. By the end of the day his exposed flesh would be red-raw with blisters. His body would be dehydrated. The night wouldn't be so bad, but the heat wave might be even worse tomorrow.

Two days! That's the maximum, he decided. No human being could stand this heat without water for more than two days.

The building below must be almost empty. Nobody would come up to the roof in this weather. Jarrett had known that. He had planned it well. No wonder he had been so free with his confidences, promising money, cleverly allaying Boyd's suspicions.

Boyd groaned, staggered against the wall. Already he felt weak. He dare not sit down—the concrete was too hot. He would have to stand all day beneath the merciless sun.

He checked his watch. It was 10:30 A.M.

The watch! Hope surged within him. He took off his watch and rushed to the wall. He waited nearly fifteen minutes until a young girl dressed in bright-red shorts walked toward the Ajax Building.

Boyd dropped his watch. But he miscalculated. The watch thudded to the pavement a full ten yards behind her. She stopped, as if she heard something, and casually looked behind. Seeing nobody, she hurried on to get out of the fiery sun.

Boyd moaned with despair, moved back from the hot concrete wall. He felt faint. He leaned against the water tank for support, but the hot steel burned through his shirt.

"Oh, my God!" he moaned. "I've had it—I'll never last the day!"

It was a Good Friday long to be remembered. At three o'clock in the afternoon the temperature reached 104° in the shade. Everybody rushed to the beaches or languished in air-conditioned bars.

Boyd Stevens barely survived the day. His tongue had swollen until it was a choking dry wedge in his throat. His arms

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and legs were blistered, and it was agony for him to move.

When the sun dropped below the horizon he felt some relief, but the thought of tomorrow was in his mind. He knew he would be dead within twenty-four hours.

And when they found his body they would think he had accidentally locked himself up on the roof. Jarrett would be in the clear. There would be no suspicion at all. Boyd cursed savagely through swollen lips.

It got dark. The lights of the city came on one by one. The great red way of William Street to Kings Cross burst into a galaxy of flickering neon signs.

It was still hot, but the temperature on the roof had dropped to 100°.

Boyd stood at the wall and watched the city come to life. There were quite a few people about now, but to Boyd they were a million miles away. He could not even cry out—his throat was burned dry. Anyway, nobody could hear him from 52 stories up.

He leaned against a TV antenna and wondered if anyone was indoors below. Too hot, he decided. But maybe someone was watching TV. A sudden thought flashed into his mind.

Quickly now, ignoring his pain, he grabbed at one aerial wire and ripped it loose from its antenna. He ran along the wall, tearing away all the wires. There were four of them—that might mean four apartments in the building. All the lower floors were offices, which would be vacant until Tuesday.

Anxiously Boyd sat back against the wall and waited.

The hours ticked by slowly. At eleven o'clock Boyd gave up hope. Nobody was indoors watching TV. If they had been, somebody, by now, would have come up to the roof to inspect an antenna.

Maybe they wouldn't even have bothered. Better to wait until Tuesday when a repairman would be available.

Boyd groaned with despair. It had been a futile chance. He twisted the TV wire helplessly. He stared down at it, and a wild thought came to his mind.

One wire wouldn't be strong enough. But four! Four wires twisted and knotted would make a rope strong enough to bear his weight!

Frantically he ripped all the wires clear, laid them out on the roof. In half an hour he had a rope about twenty feet long.

He tied one end of the wire rope around his middle, looped it over a TV stanchion. Gingerly he lowered himself over the side of the building, playing out the loose end.

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He dangled in space, 52 stories up, bumping against the wall. His fingers slipped. He cried out with fear, savagely twisted the rope around his hand. It held fast.

He stared at the bright lights 52 floors below and blind panic rose up within him. He closed his eyes, gasped for breath.

He trembled violently. Carefully he let the rope slip through his fingers. Down, down, down, an inch at a time—

Seven feet down and Boyd was almost out of rope. He wondered if he should go any lower. It might be too dangerous—

There was an open window below him—Jarrett's apartment. But it was a full six feet away. He'd never make it. He groaned with despair and fear. The rope cut into his stomach, torturing him.

Desperate now, he decided to go all the way. The rope slid through his fingers. He reached the very end—but his legs were still two feet from the window.

"Oh, my God!" he moaned, staring down at the ledge.

Frantically he swung his body away from the wall. On the rebound he leaped for the window.

He just made it. He crashed into Jarrett's bedroom, rolled over and over on the carpet. He felt as if every bone in his body had been broken. The looped wire rope fell from his hands. He untied the other end from around his middle, watched it snake out the window.

Boyd staggered to his feet, groped his way to the door. The bedroom was dark, silent. Faint music was coming from the living room. He opened the door softly, just enough so that he could see.

Martin Jarrett was sitting at a small table, pencil in hand, studying the racing form in *The Daily Mirror*. He had newspapers piled high on the floor all around him. He was deep in thought, selecting his bets for tomorrow.

Boyd opened the door wider, walked slowly across the carpeted floor. Jarrett did not hear him until he was only a few feet away.

"You!" he gasped, the pencil falling from his hand. His face went white.

"Yes, it's me," Boyd said grimly. "Have a good look! You didn't expect to see me again, did you?"

Jarrett stood up, backed away, his eyes wide with fear. Boyd advanced toward him, hatred giving him a fierce strength. Jarrett searched around desperately for a weapon.

Suddenly Boyd sprang at

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him, letting drive a terrific right cross. It caught Jarrett behind the ear. He stumbled, almost fell. Boyd hit him again with a straight left. Blood spurted from Jarrett's mouth.

Then the two men clinched, wrestled all over the room. At every opportunity Boyd hit Jarrett viciously. Jarrett fought back with all his strength. The table crashed over, newspapers flew everywhere.

Hatred rose strong in Boyd Stevens as they crashed to the floor. Jarrett had tried to murder him, in the worst possible way. The memory of his suffering on the roof spurred him on. A fanatical strength took charge of his limbs. He broke loose, jumped to his feet.

Jarrett staggered up, his face twisted with fear, blood running out of his mouth. Suddenly he turned, ran for the door.

Boyd hit him in the back of the neck as the door opened. Jarrett staggered out, pressed the button for the elevator.

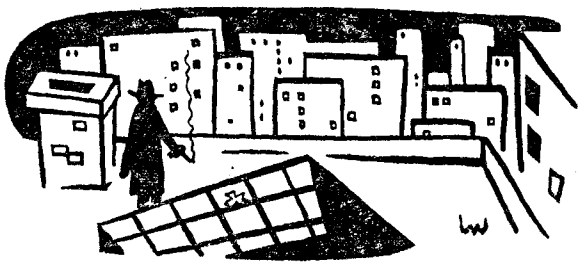
Boyd sprang at him like a tiger. The two men wrestled all over the hallway. Jarrett broke loose. Desperately he ran up the steps and opened the steel door leading to the roof.

He jumped out onto the roof, slammed the door shut, pressed against it with all his strength. The only thought in his mind was to escape the terrible punishment of Boyd Stevens' fists.

Boyd stood on the other side of the door, gasping for breath.

Suddenly he grinned sardonically.

He clicked the lock shut.



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We all know more or less what humor is — though one man's humor might be another man's poison. And we all know more or less what the humor of the Absurd (with a capital A) is, and what black (with a lower-case b) humor is. But what would you call this new story by Len Gray? . . . gray humor of course, lower-case and capital . . .

HOW I MURDERED MY WIFE

by LEN GRAY

My knife swept downward. Two, three, four times. It was easy. Oh, it was incredibly easy!

Wanda was dead. My wife was no longer a chain around my size-sixteen neck. My wife—my wife—

I was having trouble thinking because I was staring in the dimness at the knife. It wasn't red. Here I had stabbed my wife in her bed and this stupid knife wasn't red!

Almost crying, I whipped back the covers. There were three pillows, a small pincushion, and Wanda's wig. I had been stabbing pillows and a wig. You don't know what that realization did to me crouching there in the dimness and blinking at a knife that should have been red.

Where was Wanda?

Wanda was in the living room, sitting in my chair, reading one of my paperback books. I squinted at the title: *Quiet Horror* by Stanley Ellin.

"Wanda!" I shouted, "why aren't you in bed?"

"Arnold, not so loud."

"I'll be as loud as I want!"

"Yes, I believe that."

I glared at her. My wife is always like this. She pays no attention to me whatsoever.

She put down the book. "I'm not in bed because I have no intention of getting stabbed. Not tonight, dear."

"What—what are you talking about?" I yelled.

"Arnold, what do you have behind your back?"

I backed up. "Nothing. Not a thing."

"It wouldn't be a knife, would it?"

"No!"

She smiled. "The one you took from the kitchen earlier this evening?"

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"No! No—" I was going to say something else but I dropped the kitchen knife instead.

Wanda smiled at me. "Yes, dear," she sighed.

I snarled, "You know we can't go on like this!"

"Oh? I know nothing of the sort. I'm quite happy."

"Well, I'm sure as hell not! What do you think of that?"

"A momentary whim."

"Huh?"

Wanda turned on that smile again. "Arnold, you're having one of those 'phases' that men go through. You think we're finished, that you don't love me any more. But it will pass, dear."

"No, it will not!"

"Oh, it had better, dear." A touch of cat in the voice this time.

"Better what?"

"It had better pass," she explained, "because I have no intention of giving up my husband. I wanted you, Arnold, since the first time I saw you. In the seventh grade. I must admit you're still the nicest-looking man I've ever seen. That touch of gray makes you look even more distinguished."

Trying not to, I instinctively touched my hair. "I am *not* turning gray."

"Just a touch, dear."

I stood there trying to figure out what to do next. My wife told me what to do next.

"Arnold, I'm getting sleepy. Would you go in the bedroom and pick up, please. I believe I heard tearing noises. Dear."

We had a staring contest. Wanda won. I went in, remade her bed, put on my shoes, and left the house.

Michelle was waiting outside in her car. Luscious Michelle, understanding Michelle. Michelle, my secretary.

She poked her head out the window. "Where's the body, baby?"

"Sitting in my chair, reading."

"What!"

"The body," I snarled, "is still breathing."

"You mean you didn't—"

"I mean I stabbed some pillows." I explained what had happened.

Michelle looked worried. "She knows, Arnold. Baby, she knows! About us!"

"Not so loud," I said warningly. "We'll have other chances. Don't worry."

Michelle wasn't buying it but she smiled, kissed me good night, and drove off.

I went back inside the house. Wanda wasn't in my chair.

The voice I knew so well came from the bedroom. "Get in here, Arnold."

She was standing by her bed,

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eyes bright. "Come here, Arnold."

"Oh, no! I say no!"

"I say yes."

We had another staring contest.

Wanda won.

The next morning Michelle and I had a talk.

"When, baby? When are we going to try again?"

I smiled, thinking about it. "Friday. Yes, Friday will do nicely."

"Friday?"

"The office party. Remember? All the wives will be here, including Wanda. She loves parties."

Michelle frowned. "So what?"

"Michelle," I explained, "you're forgetting what a wonderful view we have here at the office. Especially from the fourth floor. I'll make sure Wanda gets a good look. A real good look." I made a long diving motion with my right hand.

Michelle understood. "Ooooh, you're so clever, baby."

Baby wasn't about to deny it.

Wanda was all for the party. Wanda's always ready for a party.

"This looks like fun, dear," she said, studying the people.

"Wanda," I said, "we should have a talk."

"No, Arnold. Not now."

"I think—"

She brushed me lightly in the mouth with her mink stole. The smile I saw was an iceberg. "I think, Arnold," she said, "that you talk *too* much."

Which could be true. I personally feel that Wanda never gives me a chance to say much, but then she isn't going to be around much longer, is she?

She was quite agreeable to my suggestion that we take a tour of the office.

"Of course, dear. If it makes you happy," my wife said, smiling.

Michelle saw us on the way to the elevator. I winked slyly. Michelle grinned.

The fourth floor consists of storage rooms, the main one housing most of the office records. No witnesses and, oh, so dark.

"Here," I said, handing Wanda my drink, "hold this. I'll put on the lights."

"No, dear. There's enough light over there by the window."

She couldn't have said anything better. We drifted to the window and I'll have to admit it was a beautiful night. High in the sky I could see the

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winking eyes of a jetliner.

"Let's get some air in here," I suggested.

Wanda didn't argue. I got the window open wide. Oh, this was going to be easy.

"Arnold, isn't this a beautiful view? I can remember other nights just like this. Do you—"

I didn't hear the rest because I had got behind her and was pushing her hard.

It might have worked. It might have worked if I had remembered that Wanda was her high-school judo champion.

Halfway through my push I felt a sudden sting in my side and before I knew it, before I could even scream, Wanda had me over her shoulder, using my own weight beautifully, and I was hanging out the window like a spider.

"Wanda! Wanda!" I yelped, gripping the window ledge.

She stood in the window, smiling, drinking her Tom Collins. "I'm ready," she said, "to have that talk now, Arnold."

"Wanda—"

"What was it you wanted to say, dear?"

"Wanda, pull me up!"

"Was it how much you love me, dear? Was that it?"

"Wanda, if you don't help me I'm going to fall!"

"Or was this some kind of trick to get me up here so you could toss *me* out this window? Could that have been it, Arnold?"

"Wanda, I'm slipping."

"Don't worry, dear. I have your hand now. Doesn't that make you feel better?"

I took a look downward. It was a mistake.

"Wanda!" I yelled.

"Would you like to come back inside now, Arnold?"

"Pull me in, pull me in!"

She did as I pleaded. Finally. I fell onto the floor. A floor had never meant so much to me in my whole life.

Wanda was very nice. She helped me down the elevator. My knees were shaking and my eyes weren't focusing too well.

As we passed people, I heard Wanda's comments: "Oh, he's all right. Just a little too much to drink . . . Thank you. He's doing fine . . . How are you, Michelle? Haven't seen you in ages. Just ages! What's that? Arnold? Oh, he's fine. I'm taking him home right now. Don't worry, Michelle, I'll take good care of your boss."

"What happened?" Michelle wanted to know on Monday morning.

"Nothing happened," I said.

"I know that, baby. Why *didn't* anything happen? Baby?"

I told her. By the time I

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finished she was shaking her head.

"You know, baby, you're not doing so good."

"I could use some help."

"Uh huh. Let me."

"Let you what?"

"Help."

I shrugged. "How?"

"Is she still painting?"

"Yes."

"Up at the cabin?"

"Yes. Why?"

Michelle smiled. "The roads *aren't too good up there. Right,* baby?"

"No, they're not," I answered, grinning.

Michelle left the office at ten the next day. Wanda paints on Tuesdays. I thought about Wanda's hard-to-handle sedan and compared it with Michelle's nifty, high-powered sports car.

Wanda would come out on the short end of the stick this time. That made me smile. I smiled the rest of the day.

My smile lasted all the way home. It lasted until I unlocked the door, went inside, and stepped into the living room.

Wanda was sitting in my chair. Reading the same paperback: Stanley Ellin's *Quiet Horror.*

I quit smiling. "Uh, hello," I said.

"Hi, dear." Wanda appeared quite calm.

"Uh, did you have a nice day?"

"Always, dear—every time I paint."

"Uh, did you have any—uh, problems?"

"Problems?"

"You know what I mean—uh, problems."

"No, dear," she smiled, "no problems."

I didn't know what else to say. I stood there waiting. She didn't make me wait long.

"By the way, Arnold, doesn't Michelle have a blue sports car?"

I nodded, closing my eyes.

"That's nice," my wife said.

"Nice? Nice, what?" I yelled.

"Just nice, dear. That's all."

Like fun, that was all.

Michelle didn't make it. I heard the report on the radio that night. Her little car went tumbling down the mountain and came to rest on top of what was left of Michelle.

Wanda smiled, listening to the radio. "Too bad," she said. "I'm lucky, I guess. Something like that couldn't happen to me."

"Lucky? Why are you lucky, Wanda?"

"Because of my experience, dear. Don't you remember? My brother used to be a professional driver. For money. He

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sure was a good teacher too."

I sat there gaping at the prize pupil. Finally I gulped, saying, "Let's have a talk. Dear."

Since then Wanda and I have hit it off rather well. We're going out more often and Wanda says my "phase" has passed.

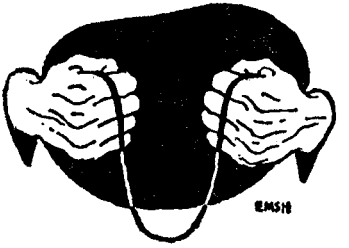
The only fight we've had recently was a brief skirmish. I yelled a lot and Wanda said rather casually that she'd like to put some ground glass in my cinnamon toast.

We made up—fast.

This morning, like every morning, I sit down in front of my breakfast, smile at my wife, and feed my cinnamon toast to the dog.

Spot's all right.

So far.



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a *NEW* Pierre Chambrun story by

HUGH PENTECOST

The newest adventure of Pierre Chambrun, resident manager of the Beaumont, New York's top luxury hotel — another peek behind the scenes of a city-within-a-city where Chambrun, like the ruler of a small principality, exercises autocratic control . . .

The elegant, old-world gentleman could charm the birds off the trees — even such tough birds as Pierre Chambrun and his staff. It seemed that no one at the Hotel Beaumont could resist the old gentleman's final gesture . . .

PIERRE CHAMBRUN AND THE LAST FLING

by HUGH PENTECOST

Walston Conyers had an old-world elegance. He looked as if he might be going to a formal function of some sort, even though it was early in the morning on an ordinary Saturday at the Hotel Beaumont. A great many United Nations diplomats make the Beaumont, New York's top luxury hotel, their home away from home. Many of them, particularly from new and underdeveloped nations, lean toward formal attire. Most of them look awkward and uncomfortable in black coat, striped trousers, and Ascot tie. Except for a tiny black pearl tiepin in his Ascot, Walston Conyers' clothes looked seedy and too long used; but he moved in them like—well, I find myself wanting to say, like a great gentleman.

There had to be a kind of magic about him. I am the public-relations director for the Beaumont. The first item on my daily agenda is to go to the second-floor office of my boss, Pierre Chambrun, the Beaumont's resident manager. I report to the outer office at

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exactly 9:20 and say good morning to the extraordinary Mr. Chambrun's extraordinary secretary, Miss Ruysdale. At exactly 9:22, as though it were the time mechanism of a bank vault, I am ushered into the Presence. At that precise moment Chambrun will be pouring his second cup of American coffee after a hearty breakfast of steak or chops or Dover sole or broiled lamb kidneys. He will be lighting his first Egyptian cigarette of the day, and on the sideboard the Turkish coffee machine will be making muttering noises. Chambrun will drink Turkish the rest of the day.

My first look at Chambrun each morning gives me an inkling of what the day will be like. There can be a cheerful "Good morning, Haskell," which means there is nothing out of the ordinary afoot. There can be a "Good morning, Mark," which means God is in his Heaven and all that. There can be no greeting at all, and the bright black eyes in their deep pouches can have the baleful look of a hanging judge—which means something has gone wrong with the Beaumont's Swiss-watch efficiency and there is going to be hell to pay.

"Good morning, Mark," Chambrun said. "Try the Dover sole for your lunch today, my boy. Fresney has outdone himself this morning." He nodded toward his breakfast tray. I would somehow get word to Monsieur Fresney, the Beaumont's master chef, that the Great Man was pleased. It would make the chef's day.

The business was routine. We went over the list of newly registered guests. There was a Hollywood actress who needed red-carpet treatment and a few press releases; there was a member of the staff of Britain's new Prime Minister who should get special attention. Then there was to be a wedding reception in the main ballroom that afternoon for the daughter of an outrageously wealthy deodorant manufacturer.

The routine was broken by the unexpected appearance of Miss Ruysdale. She never interrupted this moment except in an emergency.

"Yes, Ruysdale?" Chambrun's voice sounded sharp, but it was surprise, not irritation. Miss Ruysdale is hard to describe. Chambrun has many requirements in a personal secretary. She must never dream of regular working hours. She must be chic, but not disturbingly so. Chambrun doesn't want the male members of his staff mooning over some "doll" in his outer office. She

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must eternally anticipate his needs.

Miss Ruysdale manages to meet all these requirements. Her manner with the staff is friendly, but she draws a line over which no one dares to step. She is clearly all woman, but if she belongs to any man it is the best kept secret of the year. God forbid I should pass on the gossip that her man may be Pierre Chambrun himself. He neuters her by calling her "Ruysdale"—never Miss Ruysdale or Betsy. But Chambrun, among other things, is a talented actor.

The most unusual thing about Miss Ruysdale's entrance this morning was that she looked sheepish—as if she were a little girl who had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

"Well, Ruysdale?"

"There is a Mr. Walston Conyers in the outer office to see you," Ruysdale said.

"Conyers? Conyers?" Chambrun's fingers shuffled the registration cards on his desk. He stopped halfway through the pile. " 'Conyers, Walston. Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia.' His first visit to the Beaumont. You know very well, Ruysdale, that I don't see anyone—"

"—until you have finished the morning routines. I know that very well. Mr. Conyers started to tell me his story and I thought you had better—"

Chambrun smiled. "Tall, dark, and handsome?"

"Old, tired, and somehow very winning," Miss Ruysdale said.

This was a "Hello, Mark" morning. "It is my pleasure to humor you, Ruysdale," Chambrun said. "Show Mr. Conyers in." He watched Miss Ruysdale leave. "Well, I'll be damned," he said. "She looked positively guilty."

"Maybe Mr. Conyers sold her the Brooklyn Bridge," I said.

As I have said, there had to be a kind of magic about him. To have persuaded Miss Ruysdale to get him into the Presence, I mean. She had kept kings and presidents cooling their heels while Chambrun finished his morning routines.

I had to guess that Conyers was in his early seventies, but he moved with all the grace of a trained actor. His little bow to Chambrun, not much more than a gentle inclination of his head, was somehow the very essence of good manners. His hair was white, but not that dead white that sometimes goes with age. It was almost electrically bright. He must have been an extraordinarily handsome young man; high cheekbones, a straight nose, a

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wide generous mouth, and blue, blue eyes. The eyes instantly won you. The little crow's-feet at their corners had been etched there by a lifetime of good humor and gentle amusement.

"I very much appreciate your seeing me, Mr. Chambrun," he said.

"My pleasure," Chambrun said. "This is Mr. Haskell, my public-relations man."

The blue eyes made me feel that meeting me was a genuine pleasure.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Conyers?" Chambrun asked.

Conyers took an envelope from the pocket of his black morning coat. He put it down on the edge of Chambrun's carved Florentine desk. "In this envelope, Mr. Chambrun, is a certified check for five thousand dollars. I have endorsed it over to the hotel."

"You want me to keep it for you?" Chambrun sounded vaguely puzzled. It wasn't enough to explain Miss Ruysdale's extraordinary behavior.

"After a fashion, Mr. Chambrun," Conyers said. "I want you to keep it for me until the money is gone."

"I don't follow you."

Conyers' smile was gentle, patient. "I have come to a kind of crossroads in my life, Mr. Chambrun. A crossroads in time too. Aside from that five thousand dollars I have only a few dollars left in the world. I have decided, while I can still enjoy it, I would like to spend some time living fully, luxuriously. I do not want to know what I am paying for my room. I do not want to know what my meals and my mild alcoholic intake are costing me. I want to simply sign for everything and to tip extravagantly. I do not want to know in advance how long the road will be, or what is around the next corner. One morning I will find a note from you in my box to the effect that I have, as you might say, run out of gas."

"And then?" Chambrun asked.

"I shall thank you for your courtesy and take my leave," Conyers said softly.

"I see."

"You find me childish and imprudent?" the old man asked, his eyes dancing. "There has to be sometime in a man's life when he throws his hat over the moon."

"And why have you chosen the Beaumont?" Chambrun asked.

"Because it is said to represent the quintessence of good living," Conyers said.

"I hope we can live up to your expectations, Mr. Conyers."

"Then you will do this?"

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"Of course." Chambrun held a lighter to one of his Egyptian cigarettes. "Mr. Haskell will see to it that you have everything you want."

"I am deeply grateful to you both," Conyers said. He gave each of us his enchanting little bow and departed.

Chambrun watched him go, his bright black eyes narrowed against the smoke from his cigarette.

"I don't like it, Mark," he said.

"I rather admire him," I said. "He's giving himself a big birthday party instead of squeezing out what he has left, drop by drop."

"And after the party?" Chambrun didn't wait for an answer. "I don't like suicides in my hotel. Let all his tabs and his daily account come to me. I'll decide how long his road will be."

You may think that $5000 would give Walston Conyers quite an extended birthday party. How well do you know the economics of a luxury hotel like the Beaumont? Just to start with, his small room and bath would set him back $60 a day. Meals, tips, and a few drinks or some wine would set him back another $60. If he patronized any of the hotel's special offerings, like the Blue Lagoon Room, which is a very stylish night club, that would add considerably to his expenses. If he found friends and paid for part of their entertainment, that would take another big bite out of his capital. Would you guess one month? Three weeks? Even less?

During my rounds that day I passed the word about Conyers to some key people—Mr. Quiller, the Captain in the Grill; Mr. Del Greco who presides over the Trapeze Bar; and Mr. Cardoza, the Maître d' in the Blue Lagoon Room. They were to look out for Mr. Conyers and extend themselves a little extra for him. He might as well have a ball while he was at it.

I didn't actually see Conyers until late in the afternoon, at the crowded cocktail time in the Trapeze Bar. I spotted him at a corner table, sipping a vermouth on the rocks. His face seemed to be set in that bland half-amused smile that I had found so engaging when I first met him.

"He insisted on a table facing the door," Mr. Del Greco told me. "I thought he must be waiting for someone he knows."

"He didn't mention any friends," I said. "I wish there was someone I could steer his way—just so he'd have someone to talk to."

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I went over to the table and he gave me his graceful little nod. "Good evening, Haskell," he said.

"Good evening, sir. Everything all right?"

"Perfection," he said. "This is a really joyful room, isn't it? I suspect most of the high and the mighty pass this way at one time or another."

"You're looking for someone you know, sir?"

"Oh, I don't know anyone in New York. It would be a real coincidence if I should see anyone I know." His blue eyes twinkled. "This kind of plush place is not my usual habitat."

"Let me know if there is anything I can do for you."

"I will, Haskell. I will indeed."

I didn't come across him again until after midnight. He was in the Blue Lagoon Room then, sitting in lonely splendor at another corner table. His dinner jacket looked a little old and worn, but he wore it with a special elegance.

"He knows something about wines," Mr. Cardoza told me. "The best champagne—an obscure but very good year. He seemed to enjoy Zita very much. Much applause, and a little gesture of pleasure."

Zita was the star on the bill that week. She is advertised as a *chanteuse.* She is a dark Spanish-looking girl from Brooklyn. She sings a mixture of modern rock-message music and old-fashioned ballads, particularly Irish. She is very high-priced and her records have made her a large amount of money. She has a boy friend named George Ortell who hangs around backstage, who clearly feels he owns her, and who looks as though he might be a highly paid gun for the Syndicate.

Conyers made a little gesture indicating that he wanted me to join him, and I went across the room to his table.

"Can I buy you a drink, Haskell?"

"I'd like to join you, but you needn't buy me a drink," I said. "Mine come on the house." I signaled to Cardoza for my regular Scotch on the rocks.

Conyers poured a little champagne into his glass from the bottle in the ice bucket beside his chair.

"I wonder if—if it would be inappropriate for me to send a bottle of champagne to—to Miss Zita in her dressing room?" he asked.

I gave him a wry smile. "It depends on what you think the result might be, Mr. Conyers," I said. "Zita has a boy friend who seems to own her, body and soul."

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"My dear fellow, you overestimate my capacities. I simply wanted to express my pleasure and appreciation. She sang *Molly Malone*, a song my mother used to sing to me when I was a small boy. I was strangely moved to hear it after all these years."

"I may be able to do a little better than that for you," I said. "I think I could persuade Zita to join you at your table for a few minutes before the next show."

"How very delightful that would be," Conyers said, beaming.

I was glad the old boy couldn't hear my conversation with Zita. Her stage personality is that of a frail helpless child in need of love and help. In reality she is a very tough cookie, whose conversation is larded with earthy words. If she needs help I imagine the glowering George Ortell supplies it. He is the muscle, she is the breadwinner.

"Why don't you get your friend one of the fancy call girls who hang out in the Trapeze Bar?" Zita suggested. She was alone in her dressing room.

"You've got him wrong," I said. "He's a nice old guy having a sort of final spree. You touched him with your rendition of cockles and mussels. His mother used to sing it to him."

"Hearts and flowers!" Zita said. "Look, really, Mark—"

"You owe me, friend," I said. I had got her out of a jam with the musicians union some time back. "Give him ten minutes."

"After that, brother, you will owe *me*," Zita said.

I have left out her four-letter embellishments.

She put on a little mink jacket and I led her out to the old man's table. He smiled with delight when he saw us coming. He stood, bowed low over her hand when I introduced them, held her chair for her.

Zita gave me a dirty look when I left them alone after the first pleasantries. In the lobby entrance I ran into Jerry Dodd. He is known as the "security officer"—we don't say "house detective" at the Beaumont. Jerry is a wiry bright-eyed little man who is tops at his job.

"Your project seems to be having himself a whale of a time," he said. "How did you persuade Zita?"

"Slight arm-twist," I said.

"Odd thing about your old gentleman," Jerry said.

" 'Odd'?"

"He's carrying a gun," Jerry said.

"You're out of your mind!" I said.

"I kid you not. Shoulder holster. It's my business to spot

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that kind of thing, Mark."

"Well, I'll be damned—"

"Maybe the suicide the boss is afraid of is closer than you think," Jerry said. "I suggest you pass the word on to Chambrun."

Chambrun rarely leaves the hotel, but that evening he had gone to a dinner given by the French Ambassador to the United Nations. Long ago Chambrun had been a figure of some importance in the French Resistance movement.

After the second show in the Blue Lagoon I saw, to my surprise, that Zita had rejoined Mr. Conyers, this time bringing her boy friend, George Ortell, with her. There was a fresh supply of champagne in the ice bucket. The old boy was positively glowing. How hungry he was for companionship, I thought. Maybe he would forget his dark thoughts of self-destruction for a while.

I didn't bother Chambrun that night with Jerry Dodd's observation about Conyers' gun. I thought of it as simply confirming Chambrun's fear that when the old man "ran out of gas" he probably planned to do away with himself. There was still plenty of gas left in his tank after only one day, and he had seemed to be having too good a time to be despondent.

Sunday morning at 9:22 I went into Chambrun's office and found myself confronting "the hanging judge." Chambrun is short, square, with wide, splayed fingers that can play an extraordinary piano. He has a small mustache, and when his lips are compressed it makes a straight black line above his mouth. His eyes were deep in their pouches that morning, glittering. I braced myself.

"You were right about the Brooklyn Bridge," he said.

I was lost for a moment.

"He not only sold it to Ruysdale, he sold it to you and me too. Our Mr. Conyers is a phony."

"Phony?"

"I was concerned about him," Chambrun said. "I thought if he had family or friends they should know that he was embarked on a last spree which would probably be followed by his suicide. I am so clever! I am such a Good Samaritan!"

"So?" I said.

"The address on Rittenhouse Square is a phony. There is no Walston Conyers listed in any Philadelphia directory. I got a banker friend of mine out of bed who tells me that Conyers, or whatever his name is, came into the bank, handed over five thousand dollars in cash, and asked for a certified check. He was not a client. No one at the

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bank had ever seen him before."

"He's carrying a gun," I said.

Chambrun sat up very straight in his desk chair. I told him about the previous evening and what Jerry Dodd had noticed.

"We've been had," Chambrun said, slamming the palm of his hand hard on his desk. "He's here for quite another purpose than he led us to believe."

He reached for the telephone on his desk and asked for Room Service. "Henri? Mr. Chambrun here. Have you had a breakfast order from 14B? A Mr. Conyers . . . . Has the waiter brought the tray down yet? . . . Good. Now listen carefully. Was there fruit juice on the order?. . .Fine. Tell the waiter not to touch the juice glass, no matter what. You understand? I'll have Mr. Dodd waiting for it when it comes down. I want to get fingerprints from it . . . Fingerprints, you idiot! You know what fingerprints are, don't you?"

Chambrun put down the phone. "There's just a chance we may find out who this old charlatan really is. I want him covered, Mark. I'll talk to Dodd. But I want you to see to it that all phone calls in and out of his room are covered—also, any orders he gives, any communications with anyone."

I had some answers fairly quickly, none of them helpful. Conyers had made no phone calls from his room except to Room Service to order his breakfast and to the newsstand in the lobby to ask for a Sunday *Times*. I looked over the restaurant slips from the Blue Lagoon of last night. Conyers had splurged. He had bought two more bottles of champagne and enough Kentucky Sour Mash for Ortell to float a destroyer. There had been two cold-lobster suppers and a deluxe hamburger with onion, the last item presumably for the sour-mash drinker. Conyers had made friends.

The day wore on into the afternoon. I ran into Jerry Dodd a couple of times. He had placed one of his men on the fourteenth floor. Conyers had not left his room all day. He had asked for the maid to make up his room, but she'd had to work around him. She'd found him a charming old "gent" and he had signed a tip for her of five dollars. He was spending.

Just before five o'clock when I was about to take off for cocktails with my girl who lives a couple of blocks from the hotel, and who is my secretary on weekdays, I got a flash to report to the boss's office pronto. I found Jerry Dodd already there.

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"We got lucky," Chambrun told me. "The fingerprints paid off. Our Mr. Conyers' real name is Dr. Morton Wallace—a doctor of philosophy. He's a professor at an upstate college—or was. He had a son who was murdered here in New York about a year ago. The son was found shot to death in an alley behind a Greenwich Village night club. Police never came up with an answer."

"How did our Mr. Conyers happen to have his fingerprints on record?" I asked.

"War work—long ago."

Jerry Dodd gave me an odd look. "Would you like to make a guess as to who the entertainer was at that night club in the Village?"

His face told me. I didn't have to guess. "Zita?"

"Bull's-eye," Jerry said. "Looks like the old man was planning to play the role of avenging angel. I've been trying to reach Zita but she doesn't answer at home."

"Well, there's no show on Sunday night, so she's safe enough for the moment," I said. "Conyers—Wallace—still hasn't left his room?"

"It takes a long time to read the whole Sunday *Times*," Jerry said wryly. "But the old boy was almost certainly setting her up last night—along with Georgie Ortell."

"Wouldn't she know who he is?" I asked.

Jerry shrugged. "Not necessarily. She was never implicated in the murder. Claimed she had never seen young Wallace in her life. There was no court hearing. Certainly she wouldn't have gone to the funeral where the old man could be seen."

Chambrun's phone rang. He picked it up. "Chambrun here. Yes, Charles." There was a long silence as Chambrun listened and his face turned rock-hard. He put down the phone and stood up.

"That was Charles. He takes over from Henri in Room Service at three o'clock on Sundays. Henri left him written instructions, but he only just found them. It seems that our Mr. Conyers ordered a high tea for three people to be served in his room. He asked Charles if he could suggest anything that Miss Zita might particularly like. Very thin caviar sandwiches was Charles's recommendation. The high tea was taken up to 14B twenty minutes ago."

"Let's go!" Jerry Dodd said.

We raced out to the elevators and got up to the fourteenth floor as quickly as we could. At the door of 14B we rang the bell. There was no answer. I pounded on the door. You can't hear anything that's going

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on inside a Beaumont room because they're all soundproofed. Jerry pushed me aside and produced his special passkey.

Jerry was in first, his gun drawn.

The tableau inside the room sent the small hairs rising on the back of my neck. The elaborate high tea had not been touched. The three people in the room were standing. Zita was half crouching behind George Ortell. Ortell, poised on the balls of his feet, like an animal ready to spring, was facing Conyers who was pointing a gun steadily at Ortell's heart.

As we barged into the room the old man's voice rose in a kind of despairing wail.

"You damned interfering idiots!" he cried out. "Oh, damn you!"

And then he turned and tossed the gun onto the bed. In that instant Ortell sprang at him, but somehow Jerry Dodd managed to trip Ortell and he crashed into the table of food.

The old man had turned away, and he seemed to crumple. His shoulders shook. He was sobbing.

"The damned old goat was going to kill us!" Zita said. Her face was the color of ashes.

Ortell had got himself straightened up, and he looked at Jerry, wondering whether he should go to work on him. I've seen Jerry handle guys three times his size and I almost wished Ortell would try it.

While Ortell was wondering, Jerry moved in. He whipped open Ortell's jacket and came away with a gun.

"You got a license to carry this, buster?" he asked.

"What the hell is it to you?" Ortell asked.

"If you haven't I'm charging you with violation of the Sullivan Law—carrying concealed weapons."

"Let's get out of here," Ortell said to Zita.

"Don't you want to bring charges against Mr. Conyers?—against Dr. Wallace?" Chambrun said.

"To hell with that," Ortell said. "Just see that he gets locked away in a padded cell where he belongs." He and Zita almost ran out of the room.

The old man turned very slowly to face us. His voice sounded broken. "How did you get to know my real name?" he asked.

"Did a little checking," Chambrun said. "I meant to help you, Dr. Wallace. Perhaps I have. Murder would have cut short your last fling."

"Oh, yes, it would," the old man said, his voice bitter. "There was to have been a murder, and it would have cut

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short my adventure in high living."

"Let me guess," Chambrun said gently. "Ortell was about to spring at you. Then you would have managed to let him get the gun, and he would have killed *you*."

"And he would have paid for it!" the old man cried out. "The waiter saw him here. Room Service knew they were coming. He couldn't have escaped the murder charge when my body was found."

"You think he killed your son?"

"She killed him. That woman killed him. Oh, she didn't pull the trigger, but she played with him, ruined him, and then had him destroyed."

"Evidence?"

"None. The police had nothing. But I knew—from fragments I had from my Johnny—that she was a sickness that was destroying him. I have nothing to live for, Mr. Chambrun—nothing but revenge. But I thought, by dying, I could square accounts for Johnny."

"How did you get them to come here for tea?"

"I played the foolish innocent last night. I let them believe they could hook me for a few thousand dollars. They were eager to come today. Oh, God, there is no chance for me to reach him again."

"We can send him up for a spell on a gun-carrying charge," Jerry said.

Chambrun put his hand on the old man's shoulder. "Perhaps we can find a way to reopen the case—Mr. Conyers. Meanwhile, please consider yourself my guest. The Beaumont will be proud to serve you." Then he turned to me, all business. "Get busy, Mark. We need someone to replace Zita in the Blue Lagoon."

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a *NEW* crime story by

DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS

This is not a pleasant story, we warn you. If you like only pleasant crime stories (a strange phrase, especially these days), we suggest that you skip the next six pages—you'll find no "sheer entertainment," no "escape fiction," in them. But if you want to look into the hearts of men—rather, into the heart of man—into the confusions and contradictions of today's prejudices, then we urge you not *to skip the next six pages.*

For here, in so few words, is the conflict between violence and justice, and how the first can lead to the second, and—one of the most terrifying aspects of our times—how the second can lead to the first . . .

Dorothy Salisbury Davis is a "serious" writer—we risk using that misunderstood adjective and we add the quotation marks not to qualify but to emphasize. Mrs. Davis feels what she writes—and vice versa; she feels every word, every syllable, deeply, sincerely. Respect her and respect her right to say what she has to say . . .

LOST GENERATION

by DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS

The school board had sustained the teacher. The vote was four to three, but the majority made it clear they were not voting for the man. They voted the way they had because otherwise the state would have stepped in and settled the appeal, ruling against the town. . .

Tom and Andy, coming from the west of town, waited for the others at the War Memorial. The October frost had silvered the cannon, and the moonlight was so clear you could read the words *FOR GOD AND COUNTRY* on the monument. The slack in the flagpole cord allowed the meta

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clips to clank against the pole. That and the wind made the only sounds.

Then Andy said, "His wife's all right. She came up to Mary after it was over and said she wished he'd teach like other teachers and leave politics alone."

"Politics," Tom said. "Is that what she calls it?"

"She's okay just the same. I don't want anything happening to her—or to their kid."

"Nothing's going to happen to them," Tom said.

"The kid's a funny little guy. He don't say much, but then he don't miss much either," Andy said.

Tom said nothing. He knocked one foot against the other.

"It's funny, ain't it, how one man—you know?" Andy said.

"One rotten apple in the barrel," Tom said. "Damn, it's getting cold. I put anti-freeze in half the cars in town today, but not my own. In his even."

"The kid—he's just a kid, you know," Andy said.

Tom wiped the moisture from beneath his nose. "I told you nothing's going to happen to him."

"I know, I know, but sometimes things go wrong."

The others came, Frankie and Murph, walking along the railroad tracks that weren't used any more except by the children taking a short cut on their way to and from school. You could smell the creosote in the smoke from the chimneys of the houses alongside the tracks. One by one the railroad ties were coming loose and disappearing.

The four men climbed the road in back of what had once been the Schroeders' chicken coops. The Schroeders had sold their chickens and moved down the hill when the new people took over, house by house, that part of town. One of the men remarked you could still smell the chicken droppings.

"That ain't what you smell," Tom said. "That coop's been integrated."

Frankie gave a bark of laughter that ricocheted along the empty street.

"Watch it, will you?" Tom said.

"What's the matter? They ain't coming out this time of night."

"They can look out windows, can't they? It's full moon."

"I'd like to see it. I'd like to see just one head pop out a window." Frankie whistled the sound of speed and patted the pocket of his jacket.

"I should've picked the men I wanted," Tom said, meaning only Andy to hear. "This

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drawing lots is for the birds."

"You could've said so on the range." The town's ten policemen met for target practice once a week. They had met that afternoon. After practice they had talked about the school-board meeting they expected to attend that night. They joked about it, only Andy among them having ever attended such a meeting before.

"I'd still've picked you, Andy," Tom said.

"Thanks."

Frankie said, "I heard what you said, Tom. I'm going to remember it too."

Andy said, "You might know he'd live in this part of town. It all adds up, don't it?"

No one answered him. No one spoke until at the top of the street Murph said, "There's a light on in the hallway. What does that mean?"

"It means we're lucky. We can see him coming to the door."

Tom gave the signal and they broke formation, each man moving into the shadow of a tree, except Tom who went up to the house.

The child was looking out the window. It was what his father made him do when he'd wake up from having a bad dream. The trouble was, he sometimes dreamed awake and couldn't go back to sleep because there were a lot of people in his room, all whispering. What kind of people, his father wanted to know. Men or women? Old people or young? And was there anyone he knew?

Funny-looking people. They didn't have any faces. Only eyes—which of course was why they whispered.

His father told him, Next time you tell them if they don't go away you'll call your dad. Or better still, look out the window for a while and think of all the things you did outdoors today. Then see if the funny people aren't gone when you look around the room again.

So at night he often did get up. The window was near his bed and the people never tried to stop him. Looking out, he would think about the places he could hide and how easy it would be to climb out from the bottom of his bed. He had a dugout under the mock-orange bushes, and under the old cellar doors propped together like a pup tent in the back of the garage; down the street were the sewer pipes they hadn't used yet, and what used to be the pumphouse next to Mrs. Malcolm's well, which was the best hiding place of all; the big boys sometimes played there.

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Tom passed so close that the boy could have reached out and touched him.

The doorbell rang once, twice, three times.

The man, awakened from his sleep, came pulling on his bathrobe. He flung open the door at the same time he switched on the porch light.

A fusillade of shots rang out. The man seemed frozen like a picture of himself, his hand stretched out and so much light around him. Then he crumpled up and fell.

Twenty minutes later Andy was sitting on his bed at home when the ambulance siren sounded somewhere up the hill. His wife put out her hand to see if he was there. "Andy?"

"Yes?"

She went back to sleep until the town alarm sounded, four long blasts for a police emergency.

Andy dressed again and once more took his revolver from the bureau drawer.

"What time is it?" His wife turned over at the clicking sound as he refilled the chamber of the gun.

"Almost half-past three."

"It isn't right, a man your age."

"Somebody has to go." In the hall he phoned the police station for instructions.

This time Andy drove, as did the other deputies. Cars clogged the street where lights were on in all the houses, and people stood outdoors, their coats over their nightclothes, and watched the ambulance drive off. They told one another of the shots they took for granted to have been the backfires of a car.

Doc Harrington drove up. Black bag in hand, he went into the house. Andy followed on his heels. Both men stepped carefully around the blood-stains in the front hall.

The woman was hysterical. "They took our little boy. They killed his father and they took our little boy." She kept crying out for someone to help her; anyone. The Chief of Police and Tom, who was in the room with them, tried to calm her down. She couldn't say who "they" were.

When Doc appeared and commanded that someone get a neighbor woman in to help him, Tom started to leave. Andy caught his arm.

"I don't know what she's talking about," Tom said. "She says the boy's been kidnaped. More like a neighbor's got him, but I'm going to organize a search. If we don't find him it'll be the State Police, and after that the F.B.I."

"The kid's not here?"

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"Maybe you can find him. I've been from basement to roof."

Room by room Andy searched the house. The child's bed had not been slept in much that night. You couldn't really tell, the things a youngster took in bed with him. The window was open just a little and it was hard to raise it higher. The back door to the house was open and Andy would have said the kid had gone that way because on the back steps was a woolen monkey, its ears still frosty damp with spittle.

Andy got a flashlight from the car and joined the other deputies, Tom, Murph, and Frankie among them. They went from house to house to ask if anyone had seen the child. No one had and the mother's cry of kidnaping had gone the rounds.

They searched till dawn. By then the State Police were in the town; the Chief cordoned off the house and set a guard. The house was quite empty. Doc Harrington had given the woman an injection and driven her himself the eight miles to the hospital.

The men, chilled to the bone, were having coffee at the station house when old Mrs. Malcolm, on her way to early Mass, stopped by to say she'd heard a noise that sounded like a kitten's mew at the bottom of her well. The well had long been dry and she'd had it boarded up after the Russo dog had fallen in and died there. But the kids kept coming back. They pried loose the boards and played at flushing "Charlie" from his underground hideout.

Tom and Andy were already in the Malcolm yard when the fire truck arrived. With their own hands they tore away the boards that weren't already loose at the well's mouth. The shaft was dark, but there were steps at least halfway down the shoring. It was decided, however, to put a ladder down.

Tom, again making himself the boss, said *he* was going down. The others linked themselves together, a human chain to keep the ladder from striking bottom. The depth was about thirty feet. Andy was the signalman. He reported every step Tom took, and he cried out the moment Tom's flashlight discovered the child on the rocks heaped at the bottom of the dry well.

"He's sleeping," Tom shouted up. "He's sleeping like a little baby."

"He can't be, falling that far down. Be careful how you lift him," Andy said.

Tom steadied the ladder among the rocks, draped the limp child over his shoulder

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and started up. The firemen went back to the truck for their emergency equipment. Andy kept up a singsong cautioning: a kid was just a little thing, it got hurt real easy. Tom was too large a man for such a job, and he ought to have more patience.

"Will you shut your damned mouth up there?" Tom shouted. "I'm coming up the best I can."

He'd got past halfway when the boy recovered consciousness. At first he squirmed and cried. The men crowded in to watch. Andy begged them not to block the light.

"Just keep coming easy," Andy crooned, and to the child, "There's nothing you should be a-scared of, little fella. You're going to come out fine."

Then—it was at the moment Tom's face moved into the light—the child began to scream and beat at him with fists and feet, and a rhythm of words came out of him, over and over again, until no one who wasn't deaf could mistake what he was saying: "My dad, my dad, you shot my dad!"

Tom tried to get a better hold of him, or so he claimed when he got up, but the child fought out of his grasp. Tom caught him by the leg; then the ladder jolted—a rock displaced below. The child slipped away and plummeted silently out of sight. That was what was so strange, the way he fell, not making any cry at all.

Tom lumbered down again. He brought the child up and laid him on the ground. Everyone could see that he was dead, the skull crushed in on top.

Andy searched the wrists anyway and then the chest where the pajamas had been ripped, but he found no heartbeat, and the mouth was full of blood. He looked up at Tom who stood, dirty and sullen, watching him.

"I didn't want to let go of him. I swear it, Andy."

Andy's eyes never left his face. "You killed him. You killed this baby boy."

"I didn't, Andy."

"I saw it with my own eyes." Andy drew his gun.

"For God's sake, man. Murph, Frankie, you saw what happened!"

They too had drawn their guns. The Chief of Police and the State Troopers were coming up the hill, a minute or two away. The two firemen coming with the resuscitator were unarmed.

Tom backed off a step, but when he saw Andy release the safety catch he turned and ran. That's when they brought him down, making sure he was immediately dead.

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BOX SCORE
1962–1970

In editing his second volume of ***Best Detective Stories of the Year*** (published in July 1970 by E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.), Allen J. Hubin selected 14 stories—13 from all the American magazines and one from a book. Of the 13 from all magazines, 7 appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*—53.8%. Mr. Hubin's Honor Roll for 1970 contained 127 stories. Of these 127 stories, 70 appeared in *EQMM*—55.1% of all the distinguished mystery short stories and novelets of the year.

Here are *EQMM*'s Honor Roll percentages of new stories published in all American magazines since 1962:

1962 .....43.6%
1963 .....50.8%
1964 .....44.1%
1965 .....55.0%
1966 .....50.0%
1967 .....58.3%
(no Honor Roll published in 1968)
1969 .....48.2%
1970 .....55.1%

Thus, *more than one-half of the best new mystery stories published in all American magazines* in 8 years between 1962 and 1970 (403 stories out of 801) *appeared first in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine;* and these 403 Honor Roll stories did not include the many superior reprints which *EQMM* has given its readers throughout the years.

"*Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* is the best crime-fiction periodical ever published."

Anthony Boucher, *The New York Times Book Review*, October 30, 1966

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

This time I was almost cornered, or thought I should probably be cornered at the last moment, and feared I might have to fob you off with excuses or gobbledegook. Until nearly deadline only one choice item had appeared out of the blue. Though this has happened before, and it might have seemed simple to support the single new title with three first-class old ones, offhand I could think either of no choice old items or of none that would readily be available if you tried to find them.

Then, of sudden, they all hove in sight at once.

Now, in the corral after the roundup, with satisfaction I can point you out three brilliant detective novels—two new, one the hardcover reprint of a beauty from two decades gone by—but each of classic pattern and strict fair play. These three novels will be backed up with a well-chosen anthology of the best mystery and suspense stage-plays for forty-odd years. Let's consider.

At the beginning you may think that *Remote Control*, by Harry Carmichael (McCall, $4.50), is unlikely to prove a classic detective novel. Despite all the emotion, which begins swirling at once in a Fleet Street pub and has not yet reached its thickest even when country tragedy intervenes, the author's approach seems almost too casual, even too careless or unbuttoned, to fit in with any classic pattern.

If you think that, you will wake up with a bump. It is the most legitimate of dirty work; every move has been craftily done to deceive. When Hugh Melville is sent to prison for running down his neighbor in that fatal accident, Mrs. Melville apparently kills herself. What is the reason for this seeming suicide, with its equally curious circumstances? With our detectives Quinn, *Morning Post*, Inspector Byram, Buckinghamshire C.I.D., and John Piper, Insurance Investigator, we follow not only the tragic Melvilles, but tragic and attractive Judith King, embittered widow of the accident victim. Past a nightmare, through emotion or excitement at their thickest, we emerge at last into a solution as daring as it is

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simple, as ingenious as it is unexpected. Highly recommended.

In Hugh Pentecost's *The Deadly Joke* (Dodd, Mead, $4.95) that reliable old pro has fashioned another murderous record from the history of the Beaumont, New York's supreme luxury hotel, at which gifted Pierre Chambrun is both manager and connoisseur of crime. Having undertaken politics, wealthy Douglas Maxwell appears at the hotel for what seems a tasteless joke, wearing white tie and tails but only underdrawers without trousers; he is shot dead in public by some unknown hand.

But it wasn't Maxwell; it was somebody impersonating him. Police headaches multiply. Was Maxwell meant as victim, or his impersonator? Motives, suspects flash everywhere; our murderer has caused almost a holocaust before Chambrun himself solves the problem to prevent injustice. Mr. Pentecost has done it again.

First published in 1950, *Frequent Hearses*, by Edmund Crispin (London House & Maxwell, $4.95), marks the welcome reappearance of Gervase Fen, Oxonian don and amateur detective. Dirty work at a British film studio offers rich fields for satire and for classic detection. At Long Fulton we get both, plus literate characters as well as fast action, in groping through a formidable maze of murder from the first obvious suicide to its absolute opposite at the end.

Some books improve with age, acquiring a certain deadly charm over the years. The author has gone on from strength to strength, but he has done nothing better. If you missed this notable box of tricks first time round, be sure you don't miss it now.

Best Mystery and Suspense Plays of the Modern Theatre, with Prefaces and an Introductory Note by Stanley Richards (Dodd, Mead, $10.00), carries us as far back as *Dracula* or *The Letter* in 1927, and as far forward as *Sleuth*, still holding on at this writing. If a classic mystery appears only in *The Witness for the Prosecution*, by Agatha Christie, we are gripped with hypnotic diabolism both by Patrick Hamilton's *Angel Street*, which I saw in London under the title of *Gaslight*, and by Maxwell Anderson's *Bad Seed*.

Whether it be ghoulish comedy (Joseph Kesselring's *Arsenic and Old Lace)* or fantasy-suspense (J.B. Priestley's *Dangerous Corner)* all these items have grip; they seize and won't let go. Should you have any prejudice against reading plays, accept my assurance: take the plunge here and forever you will be cured.

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a *NEW* detective novelet by

R. BRETNOR

For some time we have believed that the only American who can truly write like an Englishman is John Dickson Carr. Now we can add the name of R. Bretnor.

In our editorial introduction to Mr. Bretnor's "The Greatest of All Webley Collectors" (EQMM, issue of July 1970), we spoke of the story as "absolutely different" and as "a perfect delight." The same phrases apply to Mr. Bretnor's newest novelet, "A Matter of Equine Ballistics." Here is a story of medieval mood and trappings set in the England of today—a fascinatingly anachronistic tale of the reenactment of the Battle of Woads, complete with catapults, ballistae, and trebuchet, to say nothing of the most unusual murder weapon in the history of fictional (and factual) crime—guaranteed unique! Talk about blunt instruments!

Now meet a new detective, Alastair Alexandrovitch Timuroff, dealer in antique arms. You will find him different and delightful . . .

A MATTER OF EQUINE BALLISTICS

by R. BRETNOR

If Alastair Drummond of Skrye had not escaped from the Tower in 1654 and taken service in Muscovy under the Czar Alexei Mihailovitch to fight the Polonian and the Turk, more than three centuries later his descendant, Alastair Alexandrovitch Timuroff, would probably not have been a dealer in antique arms. Nor would he have been in the north of England trying to buy the great Lessingham Collection when the curious case of the horse Hinchpeth came to public notice. Nor would he ever have been, among his many brief

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careers, an officer in the cavalry of the Argentine Republic. In short, given all these *ifs*, the violent and tragic death of Sir Cedric Substance would have remained unsolved—or, even worse, might have been "solved" erroneously.

Timuroff was the guest of Major Mark Drummond-Mowbrey, M.C., Chief Constable of Hallamshire and a distant relation. Like the Russian Fanshawes, the Timuroffs had always maintained their British connections, sending their eldest sons at least to be educated at Edinburgh or Oxford, and sometimes bringing brides back to Russia, until the Revolution tumbled everything down. The Chief Constable had, indeed, known Timuroff since boyhood. Besides, he had been a close friend of old Lessingham's, and he collected Scottish flintlock pistols, in which the Lessingham Collection was particularly strong. He was being very helpful to Timuroff.

They were having breakfast on the loggia when the news reached them. It was a splendid midsummer day; you could look down on the valley from the village of Upper Tiptilton at one end to Lower Tiptilton at the other, with the squat town of Frognall just showing its dull factory roofs in the mid-distance, and the absurd parapet of Parmenter's Folly rearing up out of the trees halfway to Lower Tiptilton. Timuroff and his host had been arguing, in a friendly way, about horses, Timuroff maintaining that all horses were incredibly and incorrigibly stupid, and Drummond-Mowbrey asserting with fervor that they were the best friends a cavalryman like himself ever had.

"In fact, Tim," he suggested, "after lunch let's ride down to the battle together. I'd imagine my boots and breeches still fit you—"

"The *battle?*" Timuroff interrupted.

"Didn't I tell you? The reenactment of the Battle of Woads—Wars of the Roses, I think. They're going to lay siege to the Folly, storm it, and burn the place down. It's been condemned anyhow, to make way for something dull and socialistic. Pilfer and Crombie and Substance and their crowd have their siege engines down there all ready to go. They brought them in yesterday, behind tractors, with half the Tiptilton youth dressed up in medieval costumes. It's for sweet charity's sake, naturally—the tourists are expected to leave behind hundreds of pounds."

Timuroff is a hard compact man—so much so that he

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usually looks a bit smaller than his five foot eleven. His forehead has a touch of the Tartar about it, which seems strange over eyes and a jaw straight from the Hebrides. The scar on his left cheek—the result, as he puts it quite truthfully, of a car accident in Montevideo—runs from the trim corner of his greying moustache to his cheekbone. He groaned, but his groan, as always, sounded implausible.

"Must we go?" he complained. "All collectors are crazy, but these let's-go-back-to-the-past, let's-build-siege-engines people are the maddest of all. Why would anyone want to spend twice the price of a Rolls-Royce on an enormous catapult or ballista?"

"They're useful," replied the Chief Constable. "You can bundle up enemy ambassadors and send them back over the walls with your compliments."

"Well, if you'll promise me *that* as part of the program I'll even ride one of your nags," Timuroff said.

"You can take that lovely tall mare that Mary's been riding." Drummond-Mowbrey was obviously pleased. "You can prance up and down watching the carnage, like Napoleon in one of those David paintings—" He broke off. A car had just screamed its brakes at the front of the house. "Now who can *that* be?"

Car doors banged; voices were heard; and presently a mountainous man in a black suit and bowler hat came round the corner of the house.

"Oh, my God!" muttered Drummond-Mowbrey.

"Who is he?" asked Timuroff.

"He's Police Superintendent Hesiod Plumley. He is a bird of ill omen. Whenever anything really dreadful happens, he rushes to tell me in person; then he accuses me falsely of meddling too much in procedural matters. And he always declaims as if he were reading Blair's *The Grave* at a funeral. Well—" He rose; the bird of ill omen was now within earshot. "Good morning, Plumley. Is anything wrong?"

The Superintendent advanced in an ominous silence. Six feet away he came to a halt, his dewlaps quivering. "*Wrong*, sir?" he boomed dismally. "You may well ask what is wrong. Murder's been done, sir. If I may say so, murder most foul! The first murder we've had hereabouts"—he opened his notebook—"since July the Twelfth, Nineteen Thirty-Seven."

"An interesting datum," said the Chief Constable, "but who has been murdered?"

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"Sir Cedric Substance, sir."

"How? Who did it? Out with it, Plumley!" Drummond-Mowbrey was visibly shocked by the news.

"How? Well, I suppose one might say he was shot, sir. In a manner of speaking, that is."

"How the devil can one be shot in a manner of speaking?"

"Ah, sir! You see, he wasn't shot ordinarily. He was shot with a *horse.*"

The Chief Constable sat down, speechless; and Timuroff stepped into the breach. "I've heard of people being shot *on* a horse," he observed. "I've heard of people being shot *from* a horse. I even knew one poor fellow who was shot *by* a horse; it kicked over a gun at the stables. But, Mr. Plumley, how does one shoot a man *with* a horse?"

Mr. Plumley regarded him with disfavor. "The late Sir Cedric Substance"—he consulted his notebook again—"was shot to death with a horse named Hinchpeth, the property of Mr. Randolph Pilfer of Tiptilton Manor, Lower Tiptilton, near Frognall, et cetera."

"Good God, of *course!*" Timuroff exclaimed. "Hugh, has Pilfer or one of his lunatic friends built a trebuchet lately?"

The Superintendent ignored him. "The horse Hinchpeth," he intoned, "was propelled through the air from and by an obsolete engine of war, also the property of the aforesaid Mr. Randolph Pilfer, at the hands of a person or persons unknown."

"*Trebuchet?*" said the Chief Constable. "Is that the kind with about a thirty-foot arm and a few tons of stones in a bucket to make it take off? If that's it, then Pilfer did build one. He was pleased as Punch. Went around bragging how he'd scored off Substance, who had only a catapult."

"The horse Hinchpeth," Mr. Plumley went on, "was impelled through the air for a distance of thirty-eight yards, over the moat, and struck the deceased at the foot of the tower known as Parmenter's Folly, where he was walking or standing."

"Rather good shooting," remarked Timuroff.

"Death, I am happy to say, was instantaneous. The very considerable mass of the horse Hinchpeth fractured the skull of the victim. The report of the autopsy surgeon will doubtless reveal other grave injuries. If I may say so, sir"—Mr. Plumley nodded with vast satisfaction—"murder is an unhappy business."

The Chief Constable sighed. "It is indeed, Plumley. Substance was no friend of mine,

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but he's always been part of the landscape. I feel sorry for Cecily—she was fond of the pompous old ass." He shook his head sadly. "Well, I suppose an investigation is called for. We'll drive down to the Folly and join you there."

The Superintendent began to turn red. "That will not be necessary, *Major*," he declared. "I have already investigated the affair. The poor broken body"—his voice fell funereally—"has been taken away. The next of kin have been notified. *If* I may say so, sir, these matters are far, far better left to the professional police, whose training and background qualify them to make an accurate assessment."

Drummond-Mowbrey betrayed irritation. "Plumley, are you an expert on horses?"

The Superintendent made it clear that he was not.

"*I* am, Plumley. So is Mr. Timuroff here. You will have two former cavalrymen to assist you. Our training and background qualify us especially to solve all problems concerning them."

"Besides," Timuroff added, "I, Alastair Alexandrovitch Timuroff, am the world's foremost authority on the ballistics of the horse. My knowledge will be of inestimable value to you."

The Superintendent opened his notebook. He asked Timuroff to spell his name. "Well," he said, "that's as may be, but I regret to inform you, gentlemen, that we of the police already know the identity of the murderer, and that as soon as a warrant is issued I shall take him into custody."

"Who the deuce is it?" demanded the Major.

"Mr. Randolph Pilfer," said Plumley. "If I may say so, sir, the jaws of justice are about to close on him."

Whatever comment Drummond-Mowbrey might have made was cut off by a housemaid, who informed them that Miss Cecily Substance had phoned, in tears, to ask whether he was driving down to the Folly, and whether she could ride with him. He said yes, of course.

As they got into the car, Timuroff tried to cheer him. "You know, Mark," he declared, "I'm beginning to be interested in this murder of yours. In San Francisco I'll dine out for a month on the horse Hinchpeth and your man Plumley. And I'll probably really become the greatest authority on equine ballistics. I'll write papers for the Arms and Armour Society. You know, *The Horse's Flight from*

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Engine to Target and *How Properly To Truss the Dead Horse for Firing.* That sort of thing. Of course, it may turn out not to have been a murder after all."

"What do you mean?"

"Perhaps," said Timuroff, "it was an accident. Maybe they just didn't know the thing was loaded."

"Tim, shut up. I didn't like Substance, but I do like his niece. Besides, Randolph's a friend of mine, even if he is crazy. I just wish there was more I could do, but I really don't like to interfere with Plumley's handling of things."

"I'm sorry, Mark." Timuroff was sincerely contrite. "But the whole business does seem a little far out, doesn't it? Who on earth would name a horse Hinchpeth?"

"He was named after a butler," replied Drummond-Mowbrey, "of whom the family were particularly fond. The man died, I believe, and they named the horse after him. It was a lumpy fat thing, as old as the hills, and a great pet of the children's. Used to follow them everywhere hoping for sugar."

"Hinchpeth seems an odd name even for a butler."

"Oh, *his* name really was Inchpeth. He was a bit loose with his aitches, you see."

"I see," murmured Timuroff.

"Funny things, names. If it weren't for names, probably there'd have been no ill will between Randolph and poor Substance. Of course, it was all on Substance's side. Randolph just tried to laugh off the whole thing—at least, in the beginning. It was only later that he got really irritated. You see, Cecily and Ronnie Pilfer—he's Randolph's son—have been wanting to get married for three years now, but Substance was dead set against it. You know his firm, Worth and Substance?"

Timuroff, long a reader of *Country Life*, had indeed seen the name. However, he had merely ticked it off as a specimen of the curious nomenclature of British estate agents, which includes such well-known samples as Giddy & Giddy, Sanctuary & Son, and Ralph Pay, Lord, & Ransom.

"Well, Substance got the notion that Ronnie was really trying to weasel his way into the firm which would then, in due course, become Worth, Substance & Pilfer, or even worse, Pilfer, Worth & Substance—which I admit might not have inspired confidence in the customers. Of course, there wasn't the least danger of it Ronnie's much too decent, and besides he's a naval architect on the way up. But it kept Substance awake nights. Finally

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he went to Randolph and suggested, in all seriousness, that he change the name from Pilfer to Paillefer, which would have the added advantage of sounding aristocratically Norman. Randolph was pretty rude to him, I'm afraid, in an earthy Anglo-Saxon sort of way."

"And then came the trebuchet?"

"Not right away. But Substance kept pushing the silly Paillefer idea, and making unpleasant remarks, and finally Randolph had the huge thing put together. Substance was awfully annoyed; he used to wander around muttering and mumbling about it until even Cecily began to think he was slipping a cog. Well, I thought I'd just fill you in on the background, but let's say no more about it right now—she'll be waiting for us there at the gatehouse." He pointed at a chimneyed roof directly ahead.

Cecily Substance stepped out into the road as he put on the brakes. She wore a tweed jacket and jodhpurs, but Timuroff could see that she had forgotten all about riding. She said a few words to a gnarled old man walking with her, then came on alone. Timuroff opened the door, got out, and gave her the front seat, a gesture she acknowledged abstractedly. She was a very tall, very dark blonde with a delightful complexion, beautifully feminine but somehow not truly beautiful. Nor were her tearstains responsible; the imperfection was more subtle. It was only after they had exchanged a few words that Timuroff detected what was wrong. Miss Substance's nose, and not only her nose but her personality, reminded him gently but inescapably of the great Duke of Wellington.

They got under way again, Drummond-Mowbrey clucking avuncular advice, Timuroff putting in that well-bred minimum required of any concerned and courteous stranger, and Cecily Substance assuring both of them that, thank you, she was now going to be perfectly all right. It had been a great shock, of course, especially when that wretched policeman Plumley—she dabbed her eyes—asked all those silly questions about secret enemies. But s-somehow it—well, she'd not been surprised, because Uncle Cedric had been terribly angry when he stalked out after supper. When he hadn't returned by morning, she just *knew* something terrible had happened—

Timuroff and the Major exchanged glances.

"B-but it was such a dreadful thing to d-do!" she sobbed indignantly. "I can't imagine

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how anyone could do that to a horse. Why, *everybody* loved Hinchpeth. Only Uncle Cedric thought he was a nuisance; he used to swear like anything when Hinchpeth followed him, you know, for sugar. I hope the poor beast was a-already dead when—when—"

"I'm sure he was, Cecily dear." The Major reached across and patted her. "Otherwise they couldn't very well have, well, *loaded* him."

Timuroff, considering the unusual moral values revealed in this conversation, said nothing.

"At least," declared Miss Substance in a firmer voice, "we won't have to wait very long. That Plumley promised me he'd have the wicked criminal fettered—those were his very words—by noon today." She noticed the unhappy look on the Major's face. "You don't think he'll fail us, do you? If he doesn't catch him it'll be simply terrible!"

Drummond-Mowbrey groaned audibly. "My God, Cissie, didn't he tell you whom he's planning to arrest? He's getting out a warrant for Randolph!"

Miss Substance sat bolt upright. The hint of Wellington was suddenly stronger than before. "He's stark, raving mad!" she cried out. "He's addled. He—he's a kook! It's unthinkable—why, Hinchie was one of the family! Besides, if Randolph's arrested it'll just spoil *everything!*"

"Not between you and Ronnie, surely?"

"Of course not! I mean *today*. We'll have to cancel the whole thing—the battle, and knocking down the Folly. We'll have to give back all their money, and if we try again later on, then nobody will come no matter how much we advertise. Look there! Just look at that!"

The twisting road had finally made up its mind and was meandering along the military crest that overlooked Parmenter's Folly and the Battlefield of Woads. Now the cupped green slopes around the moat were clearly visible. So were the combatants-to-be, a scattering of the upper-middle classes dressed as knights and noblemen, and any number of the yokelry got up as men-at-arms, churls, and varlets.

In their midst crouched the grim engines of approaching war: three great catapults, two ballistae, and, conspicuous among them not only because of its vast size but because it obviously had been fired, Mr. Randolph Pilfer's trebuchet, its mighty arm straight up in the air. Around the edges, gathering thick and fast, were the first-comers of the crowd, with their wives, in-laws, dogs, and

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noisy children, in numbers far beyond all expectation.

"Cecily," exclaimed Drummond-Mowbrey, "surely you aren't expecting a public entertainment—not after what's happened!"

Miss Substance looked him in the eye; then she looked Timuroff in the eye for good measure. "The show," she said decisively, "must go on. It is what Uncle Cedric would have wished. His death was tragic." She sobbed again momentarily. "It was certainly a bit premature. But wasn't it just the sort of death he would have chosen? Better than lingering in a nursing home, I'd say. Besides, it's the first time something like this has happened in the family—at least, since the Crusades. And anyway it's really what brought half these people here—they heard it on the wireless this morning."

The inconsistencies of the female mind, like those of certain French military firearms, had always fascinated Timuroff. Shuddering slightly at the thought of what Miss Substance might be like when she eventually became a dowager, he asked why the arrest of Mr. Pilfer would cause the cancellation of festivities.

"Because," replied Cecily Substance, "*he's* the MC, the Commander-in-Chief, the Grand Panjandrum. Right now, so far as all these people are concerned, Uncle Cedric's death is just a mystery; it makes things more dramatic, don't you see? But if they put the nippers on old Randolph, then it becomes Murder and everything will be impossible." She turned back to Drummond-Mowbrey. "You're the Chief Constable—you'll have to make him stop, that awful Plumley man, I mean."

The Chief Constable's face was flushed. "My dear child, I don't like him either, but he's a conscientious policeman trying to do his duty. The course of justice—"

"Pooh!" said Miss Substance. "Well, if you're afraid of him then I suppose we'll simply have to *find* whoever really did it. Probably it was someone like those Puggett brothers, somebody really stupid. It shouldn't be too difficult to find the culprit. You'll have at least two hours to do it in."

The Major groaned again. "The Puggett brothers," he told Timuroff, "are deaf-mutes. They are illiterate. They can perform simple tasks when patiently instructed with graphic gestures, but it would be almost impossible to interrogate them."

"Uncle Cedric used to hire them to work his catapult," Miss Substance said. "I wonder

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if he himself wasn't planning to shoot somebody else with Hinchpeth, and they misunderstood?"

The car was now picking its way through towards the area of the engines, which the police, much in evidence, had cordoned off. More and more of the folk they passed were girded for the fray, armed and costumed so diversely that any uninformed observer might reasonably have supposed the Battle of Woads to have lasted at least from that of Hastings to Culloden Moor. One of Plumley's minions passed them through, and they halted finally on the meadow behind the line of engines, where gay pavilions with bright fluttering pennants had been set up in preparation for the tournament which would precede the battle.

Beside the drawbridge, close under the wall and with two legs in the air, lay a dead horse. They spied it simultaneously as they left the car, but only Cecily Substance commented on the sad sight. "You know," she said, "since poor Hinchpeth's already copped it, is there any reason why we can't use him over again? Over the walls, you know. He'd be quite a dramatic climax, wouldn't he?"

Luckily, Drummond-Mowbrey did not hear this suggestion. He had been summoned to the aid of two elderly ladies from the R.S.P.C.A., concerned about the possible fate of four live percherons due to be ridden in the tourney.

In front of the pavilions had been placed a platform heraldically adorned. On it were benches fanning out from a splendid elevated throne, and on the throne, broad and apple-cheeked, sat Mr. Randolph Pilfer. He wore a furred robe of some magnificence, which Timuroff correctly guessed to have been designed for the role of Boris Godunoff, and on his head reposed a kingly crown. Pages bearing such symbols of his sovereignty as sword and sceptre stood at either hand, and he himself, in the midst of his busy entourage, was trying valiantly to cope with all the cares of state, summoning and dismissing, deciding weighty issues, reproving the unworthy. He was perspiring freely, for the presence of Superintendent Hesiod Plumley in the immediate background was contributing nothing to the brave panoply of medieval war.

The Superintendent stood with two grim companions, and his expression, though still quite suitable for churchyard wear, was now indubitably that

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of one who, hungrily awaiting the arrival of a warrant, is certain that his hunger will soon be satisfied.

"If it flaps its big black wings, watch out!" announced Cecily Substance in a penetrating voice. "That means it's going to flip over and peck poor Hinchie's eyes out."

"Good morning, Miss." Stiffly, Plumley ignored her remarks. "I am happy to report that the ends of justice have been properly served. We have gathered much new evidence—incontrovertible evidence, if I may say so, Miss."

"They've probably already been pecked out." Miss Substance cocked her head appraisingly. "The creature looks revoltingly well fed."

Plumley regarded her reproachfully. "We of the police," he told her, "are used to obloquy. If I may say so, Miss, sticks and stones may break my bones, but aspersions—even unpleasant ornithological aspersions—can do me no real injury." He favored them with an appalling grin. "Nor can they undermine the evidence we have. We have a note, found in the victim's pocket, asking him to meet Mr. Pilfer by the engines at eleven o'clock—and we have two eyewitnesses.

"Last night, at a few minutes past eleven, the Puggett brothers, Sam and Ludlow, aged twenty-nine and thirty-four respectively, of Tilton Undertree, saw the suspect, Mr. Randolph Pilfer, work the trigger mechanism of his tray-booshay, causing it to fire, thereby bringing about the dreadful death of Sir Cedric Substance, whom they had previously observed crossing the drawbridge which, I regret to say, he was fated never to cross again."

"Poppycock!" said Sir Cedric's next of kin. "Pure, shameless, drivelling idiocy. And we're going to prove it."

She had made no effort to modulate her tones; and now a young man, who had detached himself from the group around the throne, quickened his pace and came to her. He was of middle height, with what would ordinarily have been an open cheerful countenance; his scarlet surcoat, over chain mail, sported three golden griffins, and he carried a two-handed sword. He clanked ominously as he walked, glared even more ominously at Superintendent Plumley, and seemed completely lost in the glories of the past.

After chivalrous platitudes had been exchanged, Miss Substance introduced him as Ronald Pilfer, and Timuroff gained his immediate favor by complimenting him learnedly

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upon his arms. But he was not to be distracted long. Suddenly he gripped his sword, bared his teeth, and demanded loudly, "Fair maiden, has yonder knave, yon ill-bred varlet, dared to molest you? Only tell me and I shall split him to the chine! Or perhaps even a little further."

Superintendent Plumley puffed, spread his wattles, and reminded him that British Law forbade cleaving to or beyond the chine, and all other forms of violence to all persons civil or military—except, of course, occasionally in the performance of their duties. "Indeed, if I may say so, gentlemen, it even forbids—though perhaps not explicitly—shooting people to death with horses. As we shall see. Oh, yes *indeed*—as we shall soon see! And may I also add that—as I'm sure our Chief Constable here will testify—we of the police are no molesters of young ladies! Our characters are constantly subjected to the severest scrutiny."

"What a strange interpretation!" remarked the unrelenting Miss Substance. "We of the police must have a horribly dirty mind."

"*Cecily!*" The Chief Constable had rejoined them just in time to overhear the last of this exchange. He was properly horrified. "Cecily, that was an *outrageous* thing to say! Plumley, I'm sure Miss Substance will apolo—"

He was too late. The Superintendent, turning with a wounded-walrus roar, was bellowing orders at his underlings, sending them off to thwart thieves, pounce on pickpockets, and (with special emphasis) manacle molesters.

Finally the Chief Constable indicated that they might as well resume their march. "Well," he said unhappily, "there go our chances of any cooperation from that quarter. Cecily, don't you realize what a pickle poor Randolph's already in?"

Ronnie Pilfer retorted hotly that Plumley was a base-born clod who was plotting to commit *lese-majeste* by seizing the person of the king. Drummond-Mowbrey argued that, while it was hard to take Superintendent Plumley seriously because the man was such a bloody mountebank, his powers were very real and very, *very* serious.

Timuroff, who was beginning to suspect what made the Superintendent tick, asked if anyone would mind if he wandered off and rejoined them in the royal presence in ten or fifteen minutes? Then he dropped quietly back and made his way to where Mr. Plumley

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stood wrapped in gloom, anger, and high purpose. Coming up behind him, Timuroff sighed heavily by way of introduction.

Plumley turned. "What do *you* want?" he growled suspiciously.

"Want?" replied Timuroff, all innocence. "Why, I want nothing, except perhaps to understand the ways of man. What I have heard today distresses me. You, Superintendent Plumley, are a policeman. You may not understand. But we who've seen the world across the footlights of a stage, who've worn the sock and buskin—ah!" He sighed even more deeply than before. "We know only too well that 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.' We watch them as they strut and fret, all unaware that the final curtain, Death, awaits us all."

Plumley's jaw dropped. "You think I do not understand?" he cried. "Only too well indeed, if I may say so, sir! Oh, that's the pity of it." Abruptly, suspicion raised its head again. "Do you mean to tell me that you have played *professionally?*"

"I played Mercutio from Belfast to Bologna," lied Timuroff. "I have been Sir Lucius O'Trigger in Los Angeles, Faust in Ottawa, and Othello in more towns than I can name. Yes, and for one too-brief season I was Tamburlaine, because Tamerlane, or Timur, is supposed to have been my ancestor; Sir Tancred would allow no one else to play the part. I was triumphant! The stage was my career; since boyhood I had dreamed of nothing else. But it was not to be. Vile critics brought me down. I fled into the army of a foreign land."

Timuroff was proud of his two speeches, which he had tried to make as Plumleyesque as possible; and now he witnessed their complete success. The Superintendent had at long last found a kindred soul; it was his turn to sigh, abysmally.

"I too have had the same experience, Mr. Time-you're-off. I have aspired. I have been cast down. 'Of comfort no man speak: Let's talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs; Make dust our paper and with rainy eyes Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth.'

"I was to the theatre born. My fond father, unhappily no more, headed a repertory company, Plumley's Players. As a babe in arms I made my first appearances in such productions as *The Scarlet Letter.* As a mere child I was Moth and Mustardseed, for often we

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presented scenes from *A Midsummer-Night's Dream,* Father having been universally proclaimed the greatest Bottom of them all. Nor shall I soon forget the vast applause which greeted my success as Peter Pan at Brighton. Oh, how I wish the great Sir Tancred Solomon had seen *me* then!" His voice broke. "B-but no! 'Twas not to be. Poor Father died. I was apprenticed to an undertaker, I know not why. My talent, all unknown, shrivelled, died."

"Oh, surely not!" Timuroff patted him on the back consolingly. "Surely, Superintendent, you have been able to employ your skills and your theatrical perceptions as well in your profession as I in mine?"

Plumley's gloom did not lift, but it did seem to thin a little round the edges. He admitted that his dramatic background had given him a distinct advantage, sometimes earning him the plaudits both of his superiors and the press. He lowered himself to a convenient hummock—

" 'For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground/And tell sad stories of the death of kings—' "

Obediently, Timuroff sat upon the ground beside him.

" 'How some have been deposed; some slain in war; Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed; Some poisoned by their wives; some sleeping killed—' "

"Some shot to death with horses," thought Timuroff.

" '*All murdered!*' " intoned the Superintendent. "And, if I may say so, sir, that king we're looking at"—he gestured at Randolph Pilfer on his throne—"will also meet his fate, his just and dismal fate. Had Hesiod Plumley never trod the boards, he might have gotten off scot-free. Had I not mastered the arts of wordless pantomime, the terrible truth could not have been extracted from the dull minds of those two hulking boors, both deaf and dumb since birth. Not only did they witness the firing of the traybooshay, but earlier they observed Mr. Pilfer leading the horse Hinchpeth by a rope."

"Incredible!" exclaimed Timuroff. "You got all this with gestures?"

"With gestures *and* expressions, if I may say so, sir. For instance, when I conveyed the picture of that awesome instrument hurling death at poor Sir Cedric, my features had to mirror its intent even while my body limned the functioning of its mechanism. Then, in return, I had to be alert to each emotion that displayed itself upon their brutish faces. You, Mr. Time-you're-off, as an accomplished thespian, might

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have been able to do much the same—had you, of course, had my years of rigorous training and experience in the police."

Timuroff protested modestly that he did not deserve this compliment. Then, having obtained the information he was after, he listened politely to a few more minutes of theatrical reminiscence, declared that his confidence in British justice had been restored, and broke off the conversation with genuine regret.

All was not calm around the throne when Timuroff returned to pay his delayed *devoirs*. Miss Substance, looking more than ever like the eve of Waterloo, made a remark under her breath about people who gave aid and comfort to the enemy; and Drummond-Mowbrey, as nervous as the rest, introduced him first to His Majesty, then for a second time to Ronnie Pilfer, then to a lean Dame Marigold who was excited because she could find no one fitted to command the brave defenders of the Folly and deliver a final speech of defiance from its doomed battlements, and finally to a Mr. Robertson, the local veterinarian.

Miss Substance resumed her interrupted exhortation angrily. "What's the matter with the lot of you?" she demanded. "At any moment our vulture's going to swoop down, and all you do is moan and run around in circles. Why aren't *we* out trying to get new evidence?"

"My dear Cecily," protested Drummond-Mowbrey. "I'm sure we're all aware of what's at stake. But, just as Plumley says, we're not professional policemen, and time's running out, and—well, I admit I don't know which way to turn."

"My God, can't any of you think of *anything* to do?"

There was a despairing silence, punctuated by throat clearings and the shuffling of feet. Timuroff waited till he was certain that there would be no more positive reaction. Then he said politely, "I have thought of several things to do."

Miss Substance sneered, but king and court set up an instant clamor, snatching at the unknown straw held out to them.

Timuroff held up a hand for silence. "First," he said, "we may well need more time. Therefore let's start by having the crown prince change costumes with the king. In a pinch, Ronnie will be able to run faster than his father." He smiled. "Isn't it lucky for the criminal classes that the British police aren't allowed to carry guns?"

Agreement was immediate

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and virtually unanimous. Only Drummond-Mowbrey protested weakly that, after all, he was Chief Constable, and wouldn't they be, well, obstructing justice?

"Then," Timuroff went on, "we'll need a Polaroid. And a notepad of some sort. And I should like a photo of Sir Cedric. You see, I'm going to finish questioning the Puggetts. I'm not sure that Superintendent Plumley got all the information they possess."

The camera was almost immediately forthcoming, and Timuroff quickly took recognizable pictures of Randolph Pilfer, of the defunct Hinchpeth, and of the trebuchet. Cecily Substance—though she expressed serious doubts about his sanity—produced a likeness of her uncle from her purse. Timuroff was now ready. "Hugh," he suggested, "why don't you stay up here so that Plumley won't realize what we're doing? Miss Substance, I'd like to have you come with me. You know the country people hereabouts and I do not."

Prince Ronald held his peace. Miss Substance, declaring that she would go with anyone if it would help to save the day, attached herself to Timuroff. King Randolph said, "Mr. Timuroff, if you can stop this ludicrous arrest, I—all of us—shall be forever in your debt."

"All I'll require," said Timuroff, is gleaners' privileges."

"What?"

"A fine medieval custom, Your Majesty. We dealers in old arms descend upon a battlefield and gather all the weapons of the slain. And of the badly wounded too, of course—though that can sometimes get a little stickier."

He bowed. Miss Substance curtseyed. Escorted by a page they took their leave.

The Puggett brothers were not hard to find. The page discovered them behind a catapult, drinking bottled beer; and Timuroff's conclusion, at first glance, was that they were not as stupid as everyone believed. They were big, clumsy men, raw-boned, with huge hands, feet, and ears. But the expression in their little eyes was one of cunning—low cunning possibly, but cunning nonetheless—and their deaf-and-dumbness had not prevented them from being *au courant* with the winds of fashion.

Their clothing and adornments—from filthy moccasins and skin-tight sackcloth trousers past gaudy plastic vegetables on strings to floppy hats and Farmer Giles beards—were

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mod, as mod was being interpreted by a musical ensemble called The Living Twitch. Timuroff decided that he had done wisely to fill his pockets with shillings and half-crowns; he very obviously began to transfer a few of them from one hand to the other.

The Puggetts' first reaction was unfavourable. Ludlow drove an elbow into Sam's brisket and pointed angrily. Sam made a rude gesture indicating, at the least, that they preferred to remain alone. Then both recognized Miss Substance and, simultaneously, the legal tender Timuroff was juggling. At once, cunning and a coarse *bonhommie* replaced cunning and hostility on their faces. Ludlow drove his elbow into Sam again and pointed at the beer, and Sam hospitably offered two bottles, one of which Timuroff graciously accepted.

After that the interview proceeded at the rate, roughly, of one coin per question. Timuroff learned almost immediately that the Puggetts were not quite illiterate, for they could read and write the numerals and their own names. He found out, too, that they disliked Superintendent Plumley, who had paid them not a penny. And he discovered that Ludlow, especially, had a primitive talent with the pencil, snatching it at the first opportunity and producing a series of sketches which made everything he had witnessed the night before completely clear.

There were, of course, minor hitches. Ludlow insisted on stimulating Sam's memory with his elbow, and Sam occasionally replied in kind. However, a proffered coin always prevented actual fratricide. Finally, when nothing more was to be learned, Ludlow offered beer again, which this time Timuroff refused politely, and Miss Substance responded with a pound note, which was accepted instantly. They parted on the best of terms.

Timuroff was pleased. Not only had he succeeded in his purpose, but he had converted Sir Cedric's heiress into a friend and ally.

"Well!" she declared, eyes flashing. "*That* settles Mr. Plumley's hash! I can hardly wait to see his beak drop open when we tell him. He'll probably regurgitate"—she shuddered slightly—"you know, hair, bones, all that sort of thing, the way owls do."

"A fascinating prospect," said Timuroff. "But hadn't we best wait? He hasn't any chance of getting a conviction, but *he* still doesn't know it—and in his present mood we can't convince

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him in time to stop him making the arrest—not without good hard evidence to back us up. So let's not even tell His Majesty the King; let's just say things are looking up, and that we're hopeful."

"I daresay you're right, but you deserve *some* credit. The way you got through to those Puggetts was simply wonderful."

"It was just that I knew more about my audience than Mr. Plumley did, Cecily—and that I'm not half as stage-struck."

Then, while they walked the remaining distance to the royal seat, Timuroff discussed more pleasant matters, praising Ronald Pilfer's great two-handed sword, and asking casually whether it was an old family heirloom with which its owner couldn't bear to part.

The group about the king was still milling uncertainly, disconcerted by the change in his identity; and Timuroff took advantage of this to march up demanding instant action, the utmost haste, and no questions asked. He was ably and penetratingly seconded by Cecily Substance, who quelled the faltering hesitations of the Chief Constable.

"Mark," Timuroff said, "if you and I and Mr. Pilfer here, and of course Mr. Robertson, start right away, perhaps we can check out Hinchpeth's remains and the Folly too before Plumley descends on us. We'll leave the impostor"—he smiled at Ronnie Pilfer—"to delude the Plumleyan eye. Cecily can stay with him to speed him on his way when the great hour arrives. Now let's get cracking."

The Chief Constable bade farewell to Dame Marigold, who was still frantically trying to recruit a Guardian of the Keep; the true King issued a few last-minute orders; Mr. Robertson began to hum *The Flowers of the Forest* dolefully; and, as inconspicuously as possible, they strolled towards the drawbridge.

"Mr. Pilfer," asked Timuroff, as they pushed through the thickening crowd, "you were observed last night firing off your trebuchet. This is part of Superintendent Plumley's web of evidence. Did you fire it?"

"Just before I went home I did. Some fool had left the arm drawn back and ready. Even though there was nothing in it I didn't want it to go off and hurt anyone."

"Is it easy to draw back?"

Mr. Pilfer blushed. "Easier than they used to be. I have a geared-down engine in it. Otherwise it'd be too much

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work, and churls and varlets come pretty high these days."

"By the way, how do you load it?"

"We use a fork-lift when we're practice-shooting, but today we'll have the soldiery push stones up ramps."

"Are you aware that you were also seen leading the horse Hinchpeth towards the trebuchet?"

"Must've been those miserable Puggetts, though how they got the message through I can't imagine. I found the beast tied to a wagon back of the pavilions. I supposed some kid had ridden him down bareback—they do that sort of thing. It was much too late by then to take him home again, so I moved him down by the trebuchet where there's grass, and I had a rope there long enough to let him graze. I suppose that crazy Plumley thinks I slaughtered him and hoisted him up into the basket?"

"I'm afraid so," replied Timuroff. He refrained from mentioning that, to those who did not build ancient siege engines, the idea of those who did shooting each other with dead horses might not seem at all farfetched. "The Superintendent believes that he has established motive, opportunity, and means—the three classic requirements. Besides, he has enough contributory evidence to justify arresting you—unless we can demolish the evidence, of course. There's that note you wrote to the deceased, for instance."

"My God, that was day before yesterday. I asked Substance to meet me at eleven in the *morning*—yesterday morning."

They had by then crossed the moat and were surveying Hinchpeth, whom a man-at-arms was guarding from a ring of open-mouthed small boys. Robertson, the vet, was the first to comment. "If I hadna been told he was a horse," he stated solemnly, "I believe I would have taken the creature for a hinny, which, as you weel know, is a mule the other way around, but wor-r-rthless."

"I see your point," said Timuroff, "but doesn't that neck betray a touch of dinosaur somewhere in his ancestry? I can think of nothing else that might account for it."

Mr. Pilfer, aggrievedly, pointed out that, while Hinchpeth might indeed have been a compendium of the worst points of horses, he had possessed a spirit of rare gentleness and beauty. "And believe me," he added ferociously, "whoever killed him is going to pay for it!"

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In death Hinchpeth was an unlovely sight. He was a very fat horse, with very thin, very uneven extremities. His scruffy coat was of a mottled mud-color. His lips had curled back from long yellow teeth which betrayed immense old age, and his stiffened limbs, all badly damaged, pointed in a variety of directions. While Mr. Robertson and Drummond-Mowbrey knelt to examine him more closely, Timuroff devoted his attention to the surrounding territory. After a few minutes he turned back to them. "Mr. Robertson," he asked, "can you say whether Hinchpeth was alive or dead when he hit the ground?"

The veterinarian replied judiciously that it was a little difficult to say positively without an autopsy, but that confidentially and just between themselves, aye, the horse had been alive. "Or at least," he added, "as alive as it probably has been during the past twelve years. But, och! what's the difference? The injuries would have killed two teams of perfectly sound horses."

"Yes," said Timuroff, "and considering the nature of these injuries and the animal's long flight through the air, isn't it strange that he appears to have landed, squashed Sir Cedric, and remained pretty much *in situ*? Look—" He pointed to the shrubbery between Hinchpeth and, scarcely fifteen feet away, the Folly's wall. "He doesn't seem to have ricochetted at all."

"I never thought about that," said Drummond-Mowbrey, "but is the trebuchet a high-angle-of-fire weapon? Could he have fallen practically straight down?"

"Hardly. Anything fired from a trebuchet is lobbed. The angle's fairly high, but not much higher than a horse taking a tall fence steeplechasing—and look how far they can roll after a fast fall. I told you I was the world's foremost authority on the ballistics of the hor—"

He stopped abruptly. A tumult of shouts, police whistles, piercing screams, and running feet had burst out in the crowd.

"What's that?" cried Mr. Pilfer.

"Quick!" snapped Timuroff. "Let's get inside the Folly. Plumley's trying to serve his warrant. Mr. Robertson, if Superintendent Plumley comes this way, please delay him as long as possible. We've only minutes to find whatever we're looking for."

"Ah, weel," Mr. Robertson replied, "if I canna see where you are going, certainly I canna tell the man where you have

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gone." And as Timuroff hustled the other two away, he turned back to his examination. In the crowd the royal raiment appeared and disappeared as young Pilfer sought to outdistance his pursuers.

"What the devil do you expect to find in here?" protested the Chief Constable a little irritably as they passed through the sally port.

"Who knows?" said Timuroff. "The good investigator must try everything."

The front aspect of Parmenter's Folly made it appear a great, square, lowering keep. Once inside, however, one saw that it was indeed only one-and-a-quarter sides of such an edifice, the quarter, off at one end, crumbling into deliberately contrived ruin, the rest achieving a similar effect through long neglect.

"Not much stone in it," commented Drummond-Mowrey. "Just enough for looks. Most of it's lath and plaster."

"Can we get up to those two turrets over the sally port?" asked Timuroff.

"We can," Pilfer answered. "We've kept the place locked up, but I have keys even though substance owned it—more evidence, I suppose Plumley'd say." He fished in the scarlet surcoat's anachronistic pocket. "Here they are, two to the downstairs doors leading to the ramps and two more to the turret chambers—His and Hers, we used to call them. On moonlit nights Parmenter's wife—her name was Guinevere or Isabeau or something like that—would come out through that long embrasure in her turret, right over where poor Hinchpeth's now lying, and stand on a little iron balcony they had there. She always wore a filmy Burne-Jones sort of nightie, with her long hair streaming down over her shoulders. Then he'd sing to her from a gondola on the moat, twanging his lute. As she was awfully overweight, and as he always sang lilting love songs in Middle Scots, the effect must've been quite memorable."

As he talked, Mr. Pilfer unlocked one of the doors, admitting them to a dark and cobwebbed corridor. "After she died, when he'd become pretty well crippled by arthritis, he pulled the stairs clean out and had these ramps put in, so that a couple of stout village lads could push his wheel-chair up into her bower—not out of sentiment, you understand, but so he could sit in the embrasure and take pot-shots at this and that with his old Genoese crossbow. He was a vile shot and never hit a thing, which was lucky because a couple of times

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towards the end he tried to wing one of the local peasants. He was a bit of a nut, really."

"Did he build siege engines?" Timuroff asked mildly.

"Not a bit of it," replied Mr. Pilfer. "He was just one of those silly mid-Victorian romantics—no scientific spirit whatsoever."

They made their way up a long ramp and down another corridor, and, with the King beginning to puff slightly, repeated the process two more times. Finally they stood before the portal of the bower. Mr. Pilfer again produced his keys. The door creaked open. And—

"There," cried Timuroff triumphantly, "is our evidence! Randolph Pilfer was not the murderer of Sir Cedric Substance!"

"I'll be damned!" exclaimed Drummond-Mowbrey.

"Wh-why—why, this is incredible!" Randolph Pilfer gasped. "Perhaps now we'll find out who really killed him."

"There's no time for that now," said Timuroff. "I'll take a look around, then Mark and I can show poor Plumley the error of his ways. You'd best wait here; the sight of you at this point would just infuriate him."

Quickly he examined the floor of the empty room, with its souvenirs of spiders, bats, owls, and rodents. From it he picked up a few shreds of scarlet paper. "I'll take these along to help persuade him," he announced. "But we'll leave the real evidence right here; it'll be more impressive. Come on, Mark, let's go."

From the drawbridge they saw that the Pretender had been taken into custody. Three of Plumley's men had dragged him back to the royal platform to prevent his rescue by a threatening crowd of ardent royalists. Superintendent Plumley, majestic in his wrath, was lecturing all and sundry on the impropriety and peril of defying British Law.

"Mark," said Timuroff, coming to a halt, "I wonder if you'd mind my handling this? I think I may be able to bring him round without blood being spilt."

"You're handling things quite nicely, it seems to me." Drummond-Mowbrey smiled wryly. "If you were a British subject, I'd resign and recommend you for my job."

Timuroff took his notepad from his pocket:

Dear Friend and Fellow Player (he wrote),

I send this message in great haste and secretly, for the wrong people must not know of it.

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Shocking new evidence has been discovered which changes the whole case, and I strongly urge you—indeed, for the sake of your talent and career, I beg you!—to do nothing before I have a chance to tell you of it. At the moment, after much persuasion on my part, the Chief Constable is, I think, amenable. Come to the trebuchet immediately.

Faithfully,
Alastair Timuroff

"That ought to do it," he remarked, folding the document and whistling to a lad of eight or ten. "Here's a shilling for you, son. Take this note to that big man over there, the angry, purple one. It won't matter who sees you, but act as if you're trying not to be seen. Catch on?"

The boy dashed off yelping excitedly. They saw him vanish in the crowd, reappear on the platform, then sneak his way very obviously to Plumley's side; they observed the Superintendent read the paper, hesitate, crumple it into his pocket, and then, with a word or two to his subordinates, depart.

As they took off for the rendezvous, Dame Marigold, more agitated than ever, buttonholed the Chief Constable, demanding that a true Guardian of the Keep be found for her immediately.

"Madame," interjected Timuroff firmly, "I can assure you that Major Drummond-Mowbrey and I shall soon have just the right man for your purpose."

They met a troubled Plumley by the trebuchet. "You were wise to heed my warning, Superintendent. No, do not say a word!" Timuroff held a conspiratorial finger to his lips. "Come with us! We wish to show you everything."

He led the way across the drawbridge once again. He spent several minutes pointing out the technicalities of Hinchpeth's impact and injuries. Then he led Plumley through the sally port and up into the tower.

When they descended shortly afterwards, in the company of the erstwhile accused, it was obvious that the Superintendent, if not a broken man, was at least bent badly out of shape. His face was pallid. His jowls had lost their buoyancy. He walked as though he carried the weight of a dead horse on his shoulders. But for all that he did not shirk his duty. Heavily, followed by Timuroff, the Chief Constable, and the restored King, he mounted to the platform. So tragically did he hold his hand up to command attention that instantly all were still.

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"A terrible error has been made," he announced sepulchrally, "an error for which we of the police apologize and which we infinitely regret. New evidence has, if I may say so, come to light. It has not yet revealed precisely how the late Sir Cedric Substance met his death, nor at whose hands, but it has shown beyond doubt—" Here Plumley choked and, for a moment, had rather heavy going. "It has shown beyond any doubt whatsoever that Mr. Randolph Pilfer is completely innocent. All charges against him have been dropped."

"Long live the King!" shouted nobles, knights, and commoners. "God save good King Randolph!"

Miss Substance, having embraced the Crown Prince (who was promising everyone high wassail in the Great Hall come sundown) shouted out, "Long live Mr. Timuroff!" But no one else took up the cry.

"I'm glad somebody appreciates me," Timuroff said to the Chief Constable. "I'm sure Plumley doesn't, or he'd be telling them the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but. He knows how the late Sir Cedric Substance met his death as well as you and I know."

"Probably he's waiting until the show is over. Anyhow, here he comes, poor devil. Looks a bit flattened out, doesn't he?"

"Well, we'll soon fix that." Timuroff moved off to intercept the Superintendent. "The curtain has not fallen for our hero. . . . Dame Marigold!" he called. "Dame Marigold? Ah, there you are. Here's someone you simply have to meet—"

The day went off famously, and many of its happenings, much embellished, were woven into the tapestries of local folklore and local history. Wearing Miss Substance's favor, Sir Ronald acquitted himself honorably in the tourney, prevailing over a number of opponents until he was unhorsed abruptly by a grizzled knight who happened to be a retired rough-riding sergeant-major of the Blues. Before the jousts there had been minor combats between the common folk, who cheerfully bruised each other with wooden swords, quarterstaves, and dummy battleaxes. There had been shooting at the popinjay and at the mark. There had even been a lovely fist fight between the Puggett brothers, who had set to over their last bottle. The crowd was in a fine medieval mood.

During the lull before the battle and the siege, the gnarled old man who had been with Miss Substance at the gatehouse

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appeared leading three horses, one of hers and two of Drummond-Mowbrey's—apparently someone had been in touch with him by nonmedieval telephone. Close on his heels came a boy carrying two pairs of the Chief Constable's boots and breeches, into one set of which Timuroff was reluctantly persuaded. There was nothing for it but to watch the battle from a convenient grassy knoll, where the lovely tall mare snorted, danced, pranced, and caracolled, and drew everyone's attention as Timuroff, bowing to social pressure, put her through her paces.

The attackers, of course, were triumphant; the defenders beat a disorderly retreat across the drawbridge; the wounded screamed and writhed realistically enough to satisfy every schoolboy in the audience; and Miss Substance, her nostrils flaring, surveyed the field as though, with Boney's armies hastening back to France, she were regarding the Torres Vedras Lines.

Then it was announced that the last desperate assault upon the keep would soon begin, and, as trumpets blared, a defiant, solitary figure appeared in Mrs. Parmenter's embrasure. Superintendent Plumley wore a leather jerkin, a cuirassier's breast-plate, a Cromwellian lobster-tail helmet, and great jack-boots. Held in his right hand was a huge halberd; and while the awe-struck crowd momentarily held its breath, he launched into the first mighty stanzas of *Horatius at the Bridge*. It was a magnificent performance, which earned him a highly favorable review from the dramatic critic of a Dublin paper who happened to be drinking his way through rural England; and when he asked who would stand at his right hand and keep the bridge with him it was all his constables could do to restrain the volunteers.

However, Plumley was not able to turn the course of reconstructed history. At the critical moment someone—Timuroff suspected Cecily Substance, who had ridden down to inspect the troops manning the engines—caused the trebuchet to fire prematurely, and the horse Hinchpeth was sent sailing through the air to crash against the turret, rebound, break off a tree branch, and strike again almost at the moat's edge. Actually, *vis-a-vis* the Superintendent, Hinchpeth hit about twenty feet low at eight o'clock. But he hit effectively.

The horse's flight was taken for a signal, and instantly catapults and ballistae dis-

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charged their fearsome stones and giant shafts. Horatius, who had been about to plunge into the Tiber, disappeared. The crowd went wild. And the besiegers, massed round their battering ram, surged forward uncontrollably. Fortunately, perhaps, the Greek Fire which was supposed to have been catapulted into the Folly a little later on fell short into the moat and fizzled out; and the Fire Brigade were able to do the incendiary bit more safely and tidily with gasoline.

It was a great day for almost everyone, including Timuroff. Old Mrs. Lessingham had admired his horsemanship, and the purchase of the Lessingham Collection was practically assured. Ronnie Pilfer, prodded by Cecily into gratitude for his father's timely rescue, had remembered that his sword, by no means an heirloom, had been purchased by a cousin at a country auction in 1947, and had presented it to the rescuer. Even the tall mare had shown herself to be so responsive and amiable an animal that Timuroff privately apologized to her for his general estimate of equine intelligence.

After Ronnie had been persuaded that Cecily's bereavement was not a time really suited to high wassail, they drove back together to a quiet dinner, Timuroff and Drummond-Mowbrey in the front seat, the two Pilfers flanking Miss Substance in the rear. As soon as they were clear of the dispersing visitors, Cecily's fiancé leaned forward. "Mr. Timuroff," he asked, "who on earth *did* kill Uncle Cedric?"

"Nobody killed him," Miss Substance said. "He—" She dried a solitary tear. "He committed suicide."

"He *what?*" exclaimed both the Pilfers simultaneously.

"It's really very simple," said Timuroff. "I think there's no doubt whatever that Sir Cedric's mind had come unhinged and that in his distorted world Mr. Randolph Pilfer was the enemy. What gave him the idea of engineering his own death and blaming it on you we'll never know, but having you convicted by your own horse and your own trebuchet must have seemed a specially sweet revenge."

The Pilfers and Miss Substance murmured pityingly.

"At any rate, he counted on your motive, your instrument, your opportunity, and the fact that there'd be witnesses to testify to this and that, all in an atmosphere sufficiently—shall we say, eccentric?—to make an otherwise improbable occurrence believable. Yesterday evening he must have left

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Hinchpeth down to the battlefield himself. He had equipped himself with several lumps of sugar, and with two enormous firecrackers with long fuses. I imagine he also had a flashlight."

"He always had a little pocket torch—to keep the goblins off, he used to say," put in Miss Substance.

"He probably went back and forth several times getting things ready, and it must've been on one of those occasions that the Puggetts saw him. He found Hinchpeth again where Mr. Pilfer had tied him, and led him over to the Folly. Tugging at the halter, and using sugar when that didn't work, he got him all the way to the top storey and into my lady's bower. He lit his fuses—I daresay he'd timed it all carefully earlier in the day—quickly locked the door, and hurried down again. The firecrackers went off—*BANG! BANG!*—and Hinchpeth, terrorized, leaped through the only exit. And that was that. Actually, it was a rather clever plan. If no one but the Superintendent had been involved, it might have succeeded."

"I still don't understand how you managed to convince Plumley so decisively," said Ronnie Pilfer. "Surely it wasn't just the paper from those—what did you call them?—firecrackers."

"Oh, no. That would have been too easy to explain away. The evidence we showed him was much more conclusive. When your father saw it, up there in the turret room, he was too upset to realize its true significance. But it proved conclusively that Hinchpeth had been there and that he'd leaped from the embrasure, and Plumley saw at once that that meant suicide.

"Sir Cedric made two errors. The first was in not foreseeing that some horsy people might get in on the investigation. That was bad enough, but the second was disastrous." Timuroff smiled. "Knowing little or nothing about horses, he neglected to watch *both* ends of Hinchpeth instead of just the one he was leading."

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

In our March 1971 issue—the 30th Anniversary Issue—we gave you a "first story" titled "Testimony of a Witness," written by McGarry Morley in his 75th year. Well, Mr. Morley certainly did not rest on his laurels. Before his first story could appear in print, his second story reached our desk.

We would like to quote from the author's letter: "I tried to write this new story using as few words as possible of no more than two syllables—so that it would sound like a story told by someone who quit school after the eighth grade. I don't know if this is adequate for conveying a sense of drama and a depth of feeling; unfortunately the test of writing is not what the author intends, but what the reader experiences."

How true, how true . . . but speaking for ourselves we think Mr. Morley passed his own test . . .

WILL SOMEBODY KINDLY TELL ME?

by McGARRY MORLEY

"It is getting worse instead of better and when I see Bert looking at me he looks away quick and I know what he is thinking and the same with me. And Goosey is going around so thin it looks like he would fall out of his overalls any minute and when he looks at you it is like when you kick a stray dog.

"I would never have thought anything would happen this way because we went through school together right up to the eighth grade and have worked together five, no almost six, years on the late shift in the engine room of the mill. That is I and Bert went together up to the eighth grade but Goosey got in trouble with fractions and so he quit school and went to work for some German farmer for a while and that is where he got the way he is.

"You take most fellas that are goosey and if you make a quick move he will swing at you and if someone gives him a goose in the butt he yells and

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hits whoever is nearest and that is that. But where Goosey worked one day he and two of the farm girls went on a picnic and the girls kind of got beered up—not drunk because them German girls was raised on beer and could of drunk a barrel but just giggling and acting crazy like. They started to tickle him and he took on so they thought it was a big joke and kept it up till he threw a fit. Then they knew he was bad off and quit but that was too late and ever since he has been the goosiest man I ever run in to.

"I do not mean run in to really because if anybody even made a quick move toward him much less bump him he would strike out at them. He said he could not help it. I and Bert never bothered him because we knew it got him so upset he could not sleep that night hardly but Ben who is engineer and our boss was always after him.

"Ben started doing things like pointing down like he had seen a snake and yelling, 'There it goes—get it!' and kind of lunging toward Goosey and Goosey would whale away with whatever was in his hand like he had stepped on a rattler and was killing it with a club. One time he was carrying a great big light bulb for the mill and he banged that down and the big boss did not think this was funny. Finally it got so Ben did not need to really touch Goosey, just say something kind of loud and excited and make a move toward him and Goosey would repeat what Ben said and do it.

"I do not mean when Ben said something like oil the engine or shovel some coal, but when he was deviling Goosey. Like when we was playing cards one Sunday afternoon in the little office next to our shop in the front of the engine house where we all work. Bedbug Briggs that Ben did not like was leaning up against the door and watching. Ben just whispers, 'Sock him' and Goosey said, 'Sock him, Gaw-damn-er' because he always added on the Gaw-damn-er to anything that Ben said to do and he busted Bedbug right in the face and the back of his head split a panel in the door.

"You can see the crack right there in the door today.

"Then sometimes Ben would have Goosey shoot clay pigeons. He would give him a broom for a gun and say, 'Get ready' and Goosey would say, 'Get ready, Gaw-damn-er' and draw himself up real tight and Ben would toss up his glove and say, 'Fire' and Goosey would say, 'Fire, Gaw-damn-er' and swing the broom and go 'Bang!'

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One night the glove went in the flywheel and Ben did not get it back until the engine was shut down. Those were just some of the things.

"When I was about fourteen there was a show came to town where a man named Di Ablo who had horns on his head in his picture on the posters but not really would get someone up on the stage and look hard at them and make motions with his hands and then tell the fellow to do something and he would do it no matter what. I guess that was the way it was with Goosey. When Ben started, Goosey could not think of anything else and whatever happened was like when you push a button.

"It was so funny that Bert and I would laugh till our stomach was sore and then we would feel like skunks. There is always someone in a crowd that everybody teases and plays jokes on but looks after too and with us it was Goosey. When Ben would catch Goosey eating an ice cream cone and say, 'Put it all in your mouth' and Goosey would say, 'Put it all in your mouth, Gaw-damn-er' and shove it in and then have to spit it out, Bert or me would come around later and buy him a cone and then stand in front of him while he ate it. Sometimes we would say something to Ben but after all he was our boss and Goosey's boss and he could have licked us both together so there was not much you could do.

"Anyway you could not help liking Ben, and Goosey liked him most of all in spite of the jokes. Ben was a big good-looking fella always ready for a fight or a frolic and if the joke was on him he laughed too. Like one time when he had Goosey shooting clay pigeons and someone, I think it was Pug Tatum that was a kind of troublemaker, whispered, 'Kick him' and Goosey kicked Ben right in the stomach and laid him out for fifteen minutes and Ben laughed about it soon as he was able.

"You take fellas like Ben and they are almost always quite a man with the ladies and when Ben was not playing some joke he was apt to be chasing some woman. The time this happened it was Tom Sellers that worked in the bank's wife who lived a little way down the street.

"We would maybe see Tom going uptown to work on somebody's books because he did that on the side in the evening and a little later there would be no Ben. We would look at each other and someone would say, 'He will get his head knocked off one of these

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times,' but we all knew it would never be Tom Sellers as he did not weigh more than a pint of skim milk and could not have licked Ben when Ben was in short pants.

"Then one night we were all in the little shop next to the little office at the front of the building and Ben was building some shelving. The windows were open and we saw someone turn off the sidewalk and walk across the yard under the trees. He came in the office door and through the inside door into the shop and it was Tom Sellers.

"He walked right up to Ben and poked him in the chest with his finger. 'My wife tells me you have been annoying her again,' he says. 'I am telling you for the last time to leave her alone and stay away.' It was kind of funny to see him so prissy and small standing up to Ben who would make two of him with enough left over to feed the dogs.

"Ben just stood there grinning at him. I would not even be sure he said anything, it was so low. But I knew he must of when Goosey says, 'Hit him, Gaw-damn-er' and his fist swung around and got Tom right on the nose and down he went.

"Goosey says, 'Ah, Ben, ah, Ben' like he was going to cry and then Tom got up. His nose was bleeding and his glasses were bent and hanging from the little string on his ear. He stood there pushing out the dents in his derby and then he started to rub it on his sleeve. He looked just at Ben as though we were not there at all and I don't think I ever saw anyone look the way Tom looked then.

"You take when a barn is on fire at first there is not much smoke or flame but you know it is all kind of swelling up inside and then in a minute it goes 'Pouf' and there is a big ball of fire instead of the barn. That is the only thing I can think of the way Tom looked.

" 'You will pay for this, Ben,' he says still rubbing his derby on his sleeve. 'You will pay for this, in full.' Then he put on his hat and went out across the yard to the sidewalk and down the street towards his house. And Goosey says, 'Ah, Ben' again but that was all anyone opened his mouth and pretty soon we all sort of drifted out and went home. We did not mention it to Ben and he did not say anything about it to us. Somehow it was not anything you want to laugh at like most of the tricks. If he had just hit Tom it would have made Tom feel it was all man to man but the way it was Ben made Tom look like a fool and not worth bothering about and

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I felt sorry and kind of shamed even though I had not done anything. Just seeing it seemed kind of wrong somehow.

"I do not know how the story got out but maybe it was Goosey told it because he felt so bad. Anyway it was all over town and some thought it was funny and some thought it was awful and some said Ben had better watch out or he would find himself six feet under some fine day. Tom kept on going to and from his work like always with a new derby hat and his nose swelled up but not saying a word about it.

"It was just three days after when me and Bert had shot a few games of pool and on the way home we stopped at the mill and walked into the office. Bert was in front and he stopped and said, 'Oh, oh, Ben must of upset the paint' and there was a trickle of red paint coming out from under the shop door.

"And then Bert pointed and said, 'Look at that dang cat' and there was the cat scrunched down and its tail whipping and it was lapping at the paint like it was cream.

"I went over to the shop door and just then Goosey who had been in the engine room come in and started to say something but I opened the door and when we saw what was inside Goosey just kind of folded up in a corner and was sick and Bert and me felt like joining him.

"Ben had been working on the shelving and the nails were upset all over the floor and he was laying there in the middle of them. His scalp was cut and what we thought was red paint was coming from that but the awful thing was that the whole side of his skull was caved in and the hammer that must have done it was laying there next to him. I do not like to think of it even after this long and the other night when some fella in the diner ordered calves brains I just made it out the door in time.

"Bert said, 'My Gawd, get a doctor.' He could see as good as I could that a doctor was not going to do any good any more but you got to say something. And when he went over to the phone there was this cat still lapping and Bert kicked it and it must have gone twenty feet in the air before it landed. He had brought it to the mill when it was a kitten and would no more hurt it than fly but you know how you would feel.

"Well the doctor came and the Sheriff because the only police is a marshal about eighty years old and he would not know how to catch a cow in a hen coop much less someone

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who has done a murder. Doc took one look and says, 'Nothing here for me, this is a job for Joe.' He meant Joe Blake that is the undertaker.

"Of course the news spread like wildfire and the people started piling up outside and one of the first to come was Mrs. Nosey McKnight. She lives across the street and her name is not Nosey of course but that is what they call her because she spends all her time peeking out her window and poking her nose into everybody's business. As soon as she heard Bert and me telling the Sheriff what happened she starts to holler that she saw it. 'Tom Sellers done it,' she yells out. 'I seen him do it.'

"Well everybody went charging down to Tom's house and the Sheriff took him over to the Court House and they were there most of the night and next day they had this inquest. Then they found out that Mrs. Nosey had not seen as much as she was yapping about which did not surprise anyone who knew her. The coroner nailed her down and she finally admitted she seen Tom come down the street and turn off towards the office but it was too dark under the trees for her to see what he did then or whether he went in or not. Then Tom said he had stopped at the mill and Ben was not there and he had went on home across the yard. The coroner asked what he wanted of Ben and he said it was a personal matter and shut up and that was all he would say.

"They asked Bert about Tom threatening Ben and Bert said all Tom said was, 'You will pay for this' and that it didn't sound to him like a threat to kill him and I said the same. Then they asked Goosey if he had seen Tom around and Goosey said no he had not seen him near the mill since the other night. So in the end the coroner and the jury whispered and the jury said Ben was killed by someone not known and there was not enough to arrest anybody on. But they all looked hard at Tom.

"Of course all the old women at the hen parties and all the men who are always standing around street corners had been holding their own inquest and all of them knew that Tom had done it. The only question they argued was that some thought it served Ben right for trying to break up a home and others thought the folks ought to lynch Tom because it was wrong to kill anyone even for a good reason.

"Bert and I did not talk about it and maybe it was because even though Ben was

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our friend and we ought to stick up for him we knew he had treated Tom like dirt and was after his wife so it seemed Tom had a right to fight back any way he could.

"Well if you think someone has done a murder it makes you feel kind of funny around them and people that knew Tom for years would stare at him like he was a stranger and point him out to visitors. When he and his family went to church it was like a little island where they sat and Tom's wife quit going to the Ladies Aid Society because when she went in the women would all stop talking at once and then start off again about how warm it has been. Or rainy. Or dry. And at the bank people would wait in line at another window and Tom would be standing there behind his with nothing to do. He still went back and forth every day but he looked punier than ever and his face looked like it got frosted and was not thawed out yet.

"It was a long time before I could open the door to the shop and walk in without thinking something was going to be laying on the floor but that wore off after a month or so. One day Bert says, 'We ought to finish that shelving and get it painted' and it did not sound so bad except it made a cold feeling at first to think that was what Ben was doing when it happened.

"The first free day we had we got after the job and put the shelving in place and got the can of paint opened for the first coat. Then Bert who is always fussing decided the back of the shelves wasn't as far back as it should be and he looked and told Goosey to get him the hammer. Then Bert pushed on the back of the side piece and wiggled the shelving and the can of paint slid off the shelving.

"Bert yelled, 'There it goes—get it!' and he made a dive for it. Everything happened so fast that I couldn't even yell but something must of warned Bert because he threw himself to one side just as Goosey said, 'There it goes—get it, Gaw-damn-er,' same as if Ben had him killing a snake again and he swung that hammer down so it put an inch dent in the oak floor right alongside of Bert's ear.

"It was like we were all froze I don't know how long and I and Bert knew right then what had happened to Ben. The nails must of fallen and Ben tried to get them same as Bert dove for the paint can, but Ben did not duck. Then we looked at Goosey.

"His eyes were like crazy and he opened and closed his

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mouth like a fish on the bank but nothing came out.

"Then he stood up and looked at his hands like he wanted to throw them away. Then he said in a whisper like someone had his wind knocked out, 'Don't tell, fellas, don't tell' and choked and went out. He stumbled and bumped into things like he was drunk and blind both.

"Then Bert says, 'My Gawd, that was close' and he picked up the hammer and put it in the tool cabinet and closed the cabinet door and put the peg in the hasp and then he got his hat and went on home. All that time he never even looked at me.

"So that is the way it is now. When I see Bert looking at me he looks away quick and I know what he is thinking and the same with me. And Goosey is getting skinnier all the time and I can hardly stand it to see the way he looks like a dog that knows he will get kicked and the only question is when.

"Then today I seen Tom Sellers' little girl coming home from school and the kids she used to walk with were on the other side of the street talking and giggling and she was trying to hold it in but I could see that she was crying.

"So what I want to know is, will somebody kindly tell me what had I ought to do?"

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Forsyth, Frederick	THE DAY OF THE JACKAL	Viking Press	$7.95	8/11
Lewis, Roy	A LOVER TOO MANY	World Publishing	5.95	8/25

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a NEW "off-trailer" by

JAMES POWELL

The darnedest detective story you've read since your days of nursery rhymes and Mother Goose! Imagine Lewis Carroll (Alice in Wonderland and The Hunting of the Snark) having collaborated with L. Frank Baum (Oz and American Fairy Tales) and written a detective short story; imagine it — if you can!

To refresh your memory, here is one version of "Three Men in a Tub":

Rub-a-dub-dub,
Three men in a tub,
And who do you think they be?
The Butcher, the Baker,
The Candlestick-maker,
They all jumped out of a rotten potater,
Turn 'em out, knaves all three!

And here is a shorter version titled "Three Wise Men of Gotham":

Three wise men of Gotham
Went to sea in a bowl;
If the bowl had been stronger,
My story would have been longer.

And keep your weather eye out for the Baumesque puns — at least 20 of them!

THREE MEN IN A TUB

by JAMES POWELL

The first question, of course, is how they came to be there, these three tradesmen, adrift in a tub of no great size on a rolling blue sea and quite out of sight from shore.

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It had all started several hours before where the mossy, stone-piered bridge crosses the Barleywater. Along the road came a portly man with a floured and sweaty face and a wooden tub strapped to his back. When he reached the bridge he stopped, doffed his Baker's hat, wiped his brow in the crook of his arm, and squinted up the road. Then he looked down at the brown river and drummed his fingers on the parapet. A moment later he had taken the path down through the burdocks to the river bank and in a few moments the tub was bobbing in the Barleywater under his critical eye.

"Planning on taking a trip, Baker?" said a voice. The Baker started and swung around. A sallow-faced, uncommonly short little man in a Candlestick-maker's hat was emerging from the shadows beneath the bridge.

"As a matter of fact, I'm on my way to the Miller's mill to buy some flour," replied the Baker, cross at having been surprised. "Why shouldn't the tub carry me there, since I'll have to carry both tub and flour on my return?" He said this last uneasily, as though half afraid the stranger would laugh.

But the Candlestick-maker gave an ingratiating little smile and said, "I'm headed that way myself. Perhaps we could be shipmates."

There was a moment of grave consideration and then the Baker nodded. He had decided that two men in a tub would look less ridiculous than one.

"A boat trip's just my meat. Room for another?" said a deep voice from above. Leaning over the parapet was a bull-necked, red-faced man wearing a Butcher's hat cocked at a jaunty angle and carrying a long salami stuffed under his arm like a fat swagger stick. "I'm on my way to the Miller's mill to buy his pig," said the Butcher. "But I've developed a blister on my heel." He laughed. "I'll never bring home the bacon that way."

The Baker frowned. Perhaps it was the pun. But then he shrugged. In no time at all the three were sitting in the tub ham against ham with their knees up under their chins. At a nod from the Baker, the Candlestick-maker released his hold on the bullrushes and the Butcher pushed off from shore with the salami.

Immediately they were caught up in the grip of the current and carried off full tilt downstream. Thirty bloodless knuckles gripped the rim of the tub. But each man tried to disguise his fear by chatting as

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traveling companions often do. Naturally, the conversation turned to the big news story of the moment—the murder of an old miser the night before.

The miser's body had been discovered in his second-hand shop lying beside his open strongbox. He had been struck down by a blunt instrument. Of particular interest to the police were the abundance of white fingermarks, the mud caked with sawdust on the fireplace hob where it was believed the murderer had scraped his shoe, and a 12-ounce package of tallow wrapped in brown paper, tied with a string, and stamped *1 pound* which had been found on the counter.

But the real puzzler was how the murderer had persuaded the old skinflint to produce his strongbox. Once before, so the story went, a robber had broken in, bound the miser to a chair and wasted the entire night ransacking the shop for the strongbox. The intruder had even toasted the old man's toes over the fire. But the miser had refused to reveal the secret hiding place. Dawn had sent the burglar fleeing empty-handed—on a second-hand Hamilton Whirligig bicycle which the miser sold him at a tidy profit.

The three men in the tub agreed the killer would certainly be caught. Wasn't there to be a house-to-house search? And hadn't the King's soldiers set up a roadblock a mile this side of the Miller's mill? How could the criminal get past that?

This last question stopped the conversation dead in its tracks. As the tub raced down the Barleywater, the passengers eyed each other uneasily. Finally, the Butcher winked at the Candlestick-maker, glanced down at the tub, and said, "A very clever way to get around the roadblock, Baker."

"I resent the implication, sir," said the Baker indignantly. "But since you've brought it up, perhaps you'd explain to the good Candlestick-maker here and to myself just where you came from. There was no one ahead or behind me on the road. You must've been hiding in the bushes."

"I was resting my blister in the shade," said the Butcher, leaning forward so that he and the Baker were nose to nose. "Want to make something of it?"

"I'll buy that," said the Candlestick-maker, moving closer to the Butcher as if for protection. "And I was napping in the cool under the bridge, Baker," he added defiantly.

"Skulking, more likely," muttered the Baker, trying to avoid their united gaze. Suddenly he pointed a finger. "You've

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got blood on your shirt, Candlestick-maker," he said.

"I'm given to nosebleeds," the little man explained.

The Baker waited, as though expecting a nosebleed to appear on the spot. Instead, the Candlestick-maker said, "Why don't you tell my friend the Butcher and me where you got the bloodstains on your smock?"

"It's jam," said the Baker, trying to brush the red spots away. "Today I made strawberry turnovers." When the Butcher raised an incredulous eyebrow the Baker shouted, "Well, what about you? What about the blood on your apron?"

The Butcher laughed heartily. "But there isn't any," he said. The candlestick-maker joined his nasal whinny to the merriment.

"A Butcher without blood on his apron, now *that* I call suspicious!" shouted the Baker. The Candlestick-maker stopped in mid-whinny and stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"I'll be frank," said the Butcher. "Until this year I had a good thing going, buying horseflesh from the cavalry and selling it to the infantry as bully beef. Then somebody outbribed me for the contract. Lately I haven't even had enough money to buy animals to butcher. But if the Miller will take this"—he jabbed the salami in the Candlestick-maker's ribs —"as a down payment on his pig, then I'll be eating high on the hog again."

"Bribery smacks of unfair business practices," sniffed the Baker. "I warrant you got what you deserved." The Candlestick-maker rubbed his side and nodded in agreement.

"I know all about you, Mr. High and Mighty Baker," said the Butcher. "Tell us why you're fetching flour by shank's mare. The Baker here had to sell his Rolls, Candlestick-maker."

"A temporary financial setback," replied the Baker calmly. "An honest hazard of the free-enterprise system."

"Baloney!" snorted the Butcher. "The Baker here tried to corner the prune Danish market by buying up plum futures. A bumper crop foiled his plan." The Butcher dug the Candlestick-maker in the ribs again and added, "He needs dough bad."

The Candlestick-maker grimaced, though whether from pain, seasickness or the pun would be hard to say.

Just then the tub rounded a turn in the Barleywater. Ahead of them was the Miller's mill. Beside it, waving his arms in a frantic signal that the floodgate

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was open, was the Miller himself. Their desperate paddling for the bank only set the tub to spinning like a top. It shot through the floodgate and, riding on an arc of water, plunged down onto the river again. The Miller ran after them along the bank but the tub soon left him behind. He stooped, placed his Miller's hat over his heart, and bowed his head.

The Butcher and the Baker traded hideous faces as the tub raced between the widening banks. "Listen," pleaded the Candlestick-maker, whose face now had a definite greenish cast, "can't we all be friends? I mean, why get all worked up about a little murder, right? The old miser was no great loss, right?" But the Butcher and the Baker glared on. "Please," coaxed the little man, "we're all in the same—in the same—" He choked on the word.

"—boat," said the Butcher, happy to make the Baker wince.

"Listen," said the Candlestick-maker, "we all bend the law a little now and then to make an honest profit. Why, a few years ago I ran into some trouble like that myself. You might say I tried to spread myself a bit too thin."

"You mean you tried to branch out into candelabra?" said the Butcher. The Baker gritted his teeth.

"I mean I was sent to jail for adding lead to the gold in my candlesticks," said the little man.

Now the tub had reached the river mouth where the broad brown Barleywater mingled with the blue sea.

"The man's a convicted criminal!" sputtered the Baker, after a moment of shocked silence.

"Actually, I've paid my debt to society," said the Candlestick-maker. "Now I'm off to make a fresh start with nothing to my name but this." He pulled a candlestick from his shirt. "I made it in the prison hobby shop."

"Very illuminating," said the Butcher, hefting the candlestick thoughtfully and handing it to the Baker.

"I guess that's about as blunt as an instrument can get," commented the Baker.

The Candlestick-maker's lower lip began to tremble. "Yeah?" he shouted. "Well, what about the mud and sawdust on the hob? Who covers his floor with sawdust?"

"A Carpenter," said the Butcher.

"An Iceman," said the Baker.

"A Butcher!" shouted the Candlestick-maker with tears in his eyes. The Baker joined in

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the Butcher's laughter. "Take care, Baker," warned the Candlestick-maker. "Don't forget the white fingermarks, the floury fingermarks!"

"Pooh," said the Baker. "Everyone knows the miser was so cheap he made his own bread. Obviously he had just prepared his miserable evening hoecake when the murderer arrived."

"A good point," admitted the Butcher. "And here's another: the miser was also a vegetarian. Now we all know the body needs red meat to build up the bones. I'll bet the miser was a weakling and easily overpowered, even by a puny Candlestick-maker."

But his words only set the Baker expounding on the health-giving properties of grains and cereals. "An ox, after all, is a vegetarian," he said. "And who is stronger than an ox?"

"And who is the most experienced at killing an ox?" piped the Candlestick-maker. The Baker folded his arms and nodded.

"Yeah?" said the Butcher. "Well, what about the tallow? Crooked Bakers use it when the recipe calls for butter."

"And Butchers sell it to misers who make their own candles," said the Candlestick-maker.

Furious, the Butcher started rocking the tub back and forth and up and down in the water. "Confess, you wicked, wicked Candlestick-maker," he demanded. "You bludgeoned the old curmudgeon!" The Candlestick-maker turned an abrupt, unhealthy green and ducked his head over the side.

The tub was taking on water now. "Stop, Butcher!" pleaded the Baker. "We'll all drown soon enough as it is!"

But the Butcher rocked on until the Candlestick-maker, his head hanging over the side and his shoulders heaving, gasped, "All right, I confess. I confess. Just stop rocking the—the boat."

The Butcher and the Baker set about bailing with their hats. After a bit the Baker said, "Butcher, I know *you're* the murderer. Our sickly little friend here isn't smart enough to make the old miser to bring out his strongbox."

"For a Candlestick-maker he isn't too bright," conceded the Butcher, scooping out the water as fast as he could.

"That leaves only you and me, and I know it wasn't me," said the Baker.

"Baker, you really take the cake," grinned the Butcher.

The Baker stopped dead, the last hatful of water in his hands. "Listen," he said through

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clenched teeth, "maybe the identity of the murderer isn't important. After all, in an hour or two we'll all be dead. But by the Lord Harry, those puns of yours must stop!"

"All Butchers are cutups," smirked the Butcher.

The Baker turned livid. "All right!" he shouted. "Okay! If that's the way you want it, then let's weigh the evidence."

"Thumbs down on that," grinned the Butcher, wagging his thumbs. The Baker sputtered with rage and then fell into a thoughtful silence.

"We're doomed, you know. Doomed!" moaned the Candlestick-maker. And indeed they were out of sight from shore, bobbing up and down on the blue swells. "Surely those who die with great unanswered questions on their souls are the stuff ghosts are made of," whined the little man.

"Fortunately it'll never come to that," said the Baker. "You see, I've solved the mystery."

"Just like that? As easy as pie, eh, Baker?" said the Butcher.

The Baker ignored him. "Candlestick-maker," he said, "remember that package of tallow marked *1 pound*, the one that only weighed twelve ounces? Now who is the biggest offender when it comes to playing around with scales?"

The Candlestick-maker hesitated and then said triumphantly, "A Musician!"

"A Map-maker," said the Butcher.

The Baker wagged his thumbs. "No, a Butcher!" he shouted in exasperation.

"Hah!" scoffed the Butcher, "that pound loaf of yours is notoriously underweight. Notoriously. And the Candlestick-maker has done time for chiseling on the gold in his candlesticks."

"Be that as it may," insisted the Baker, "his puny little thumb weighs a mere two ounces at most, while my own is scarcely three. But yours is quite obviously a good four. Add four ounces of thumb to twelve ounces of tallow and what have you got? You've got a pound. Proof positive that you were the one who weighed the tallow out, Butcher. Our thumbs prove us innocent, just as yours proves you guilty. And that is evidence that would stand up in any court of law."

"Damn you, Baker, why don't you mind your own crummy business!" shouted the Butcher angrily. But then he shrugged in resignation. "Fingered by my own thumb," he said with a half smile.

"Come," said the Baker, "tell us about the strongbox.

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Let's all die friends, full of the spirit of good fellowship and brotherly love."

"Hear, hear!" agreed the Candlestick-maker.

"Suddenly you're a real flour-child, Baker," said the Butcher sarcastically.

"But he's right," said the Candlestick-maker. "Let's all die friends." With that he threw his arms across his companions' shoulders and broke into song: "Should auld acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind? Should auld . . ."

The Butcher shrugged off the arm and broke his salami in two across his knee. A shower of gold coins fell into the bottom of the tub. "Here, have something to eat, my little friend," said the Butcher, waving one end of the well-spiced and garlicked salami under the Candlestick-maker's nose. The Candlestick-maker stopped in mid-song, gagged, and stuck his head over the side. The Butcher chuckled darkly and took an enormous bite of the hollow salami.

The Baker licked his lips and watched hungrily. After a moment he said, "I don't suppose you'd—" and he nodded at the salami.

"You don't suppose I'd tell you how I got the miser to produce his strongbox? Be glad to," said the Butcher with his mouth full. "As our wretched little friend here said, I used to sell the miser tallow. When I showed up last night I told the old skinflint I was making my last delivery. 'I've come into a sizeable inheritance,' I told him. 'So I'm getting out of this nickle and dime business. But since you've been a loyal customer, I'd like to throw a little business your way. I need a strongbox, something to keep my inheritance safely under lock and key.'

"Well, the old codger's face fell because, as I knew, he didn't have a strongbox left in stock. 'Perhaps an old steamer trunk,' he suggested, trying to lead me over to the second-hand luggage section. But I scoffed and said I'd take my business to the old miser in the next street. I was almost out the door before the old penny-pincher broke down.

" 'If you'll wait here a moment, I believe I have just the thing,' he said. He went to the back of the shop. I called after him, 'It better not be one of those cheap strongboxes where the bottoms are always falling out!' A moment later he returned, lugging his own strongbox, rattling the contents back and forth to show how sturdily it was built.

" 'I suppose it comes with a key,' I said. 'Wouldn't be much

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of a strongbox without a key,' he laughed, producing it on a chain around his neck. That was when I hit him with a wooden mallet I use for making veal Scallopini alla Marsala."

"Clever," conceded the Baker. Even the Candlestick-maker grunted admiringly.

"Butchers and people of that kidney do have brains," smirked the Butcher, popping the last of the salami into his mouth.

The Candlestick-maker winced as though struck in the face. The Baker turned scarlet with indignation and sputtered, "My dear sir, the Candlestick-maker and I appreciate your setting our minds at rest. Nevertheless, we strongly suggest that your humor is both low and ill-timed. We beg you to consider the solemnity of these, our final moments, and restrain yourself."

The Candlestick-maker nodded earnestly. "Surely some terrible fate awaits those who die with a pun on their lips or one ringing in their ears."

"Stop beefing," leered the Butcher. "I'll knuckle under."

"At once!" demanded the Baker.

"Immediately!" insisted the Candlestick-maker.

"Chop-chop," agreed the Butcher.

So they bound the Butcher and gagged him and when they were picked up by the Royal Navy several hours later, they turned him over to the King's justice. He was quickly tried and executed.

If the tub had been weaker, this tale might have been bleaker.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 358th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a little fable of man's eternal greed . . .

The author, Steve Sherman, was 32 years old when he submitted his "first story." He has a Master's Degree in Communication Arts from Loyola University of Los Angeles and a Master's in Library Science from UCLA. He taught high-school English for two years in Los Angeles before becoming one of three teachers in a state school in Ruby, a log-cabin village of about 150 Athabascan Indians and whites on the Yukon River, halfway between Fairbanks and Nome. "The entire dramatis personae of Shakespeare was in Ruby," Mr. Sherman wrote us, "which again makes Shakespeare extremely insightful and any group of people anywhere extremely intriguing." (Spoken like a true writer.) Later he was reference librarian at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, and now he is free-lancing -- writing and editing "for as long as the Alaskan high prices will allow."

This man, we'll wager, has tales to tell . . .

YELLOW FEVER

by STEVE SHERMAN

The old Eskimo leaned to the side and said, "You new here, huh?" He smiled one of those ingenuous toothless smiles that only an olive-skinned, moon-faced native of the north could produce.

Reynolds smiled back. He sipped his Scotch and turned to the man next to him.

Neither John K. Reynolds nor David S. Porter, vice presidents of Engol Oil Company, Houston, Texas, was overjoyed with their transfer to Anchorage. In fact, they saw Alaska as a gigantic 586,000-square-mile wasteland. Dallas, New York, San Francisco, Detroit, Chicago were their

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territories—places where people were with it, knew what was going on.

But when the president of the company said go, they went. Reynolds flew the company twin-engine Navajo from Houston to Anchorage and set up operations for a stronghold on the Alaskan future. Phenomenal petroleum reserves on the North Slope of the far north wilderness state were discovered in the summer of 1968. An estimated 10-to-20 billion barrels of oil under the vast tundra next to the Arctic Ocean would produce billions of dollars in profit for enterprising companies. Engol Oil was going to be one of them.

The old Eskimo tugged at Reynolds' arm. "Had checkup," he said. "At hospital."

"Oh," Reynolds said. He heard that Alaska natives could be a nuisance in a bar. "What happened?"

"Chop wood in village," the Eskimo said. "Ax break off and hit head." He turned and bent his neck. A small bandage covered a shaved spot on the side of his head. "Me Toughluck. First name Harold."

"Harold Toughluck," Reynolds said and like a UCLA biologist he peered into the Eskimo's watery eyes. "Well, I'm John Reynolds and this is Dave Porter."

They shook hands. Toughluck's grip felt like a seven-year-old's.

"You oil people from Texas, huh?"

"We're up here looking for jobs," Porter said, winking at Reynolds. "Maybe we'll get on one of the drilling rigs up at the Slope."

Reynolds held back a grin. "Know any jobs open?" he asked. "Driving a truck. Welding. Anything like that?"

Toughluck shook his head. "No jobs," he said seriously. "Better go back Texas."

Reynolds and Porter laughed. "Maybe we'll do that."

Suddenly the Eskimo clunked his beer mug on the bar and searched his pockets with both hands. His black hair flopped over his eyes. His face was spotted with dirt, his lips were wet and heavy.

From his hip pocket he brought out a picture and slapped it on the bar. "Ever see nugget like this?" he said.

The color photograph showed a large deep-yellow angular gold nugget on a red-velvet background. A ruler alongside the base of the nugget showed that the raw gold piece was three and a quarter inches long. It had to be worth a bundle.

"Say, that's really something!" Reynolds said with

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genuine enthusiasm. "Is that yours? You find it?"

Toughluck wiped his mouth with his forearm and smiled. "I find it back of village," he said. "Kivalina my village. Near Nome."

Reynolds raised his hand. "Hey, Slim," he called, "how 'bout setting up another round? Another beer for my friend here!"

The native flashed another smile.

Reynolds and Porter glanced at each other: gold nuggets in an Eskimo's hands just weren't making the best use of Alaska's natural resources.

Toughluck grabbed the fresh beer and took three large swallows.

"That's really some hunk of gold," Reynolds said, his imagination suddenly visualizing the Nome gold rush at the turn of the century. "It must be worth a couple of thousand dollars."

"Nine thousand," Toughluck smiled. He sloshed down three more swallows of beer.

Reynolds and Porter looked knowingly at each other while Toughluck's eyes were back of the mug.

"Nine thousand," Porter repeated softly.

"Sell gold dust to government but not nugget," Toughluck said. "Jewelry maker say this nugget worth nine thousand dollars. Maybe more."

The two men drank their Scotches. They didn't want to appear overinterested.

Toughluck leaned closer to Reynolds. "But getting old," he said, and shrugged. "What Eskimo want with big nugget like that? Huh? Need land and ocean and walrus and whale and wild berries."

Reynolds waited a moment. "You mean you still have it?"

"Have lots big nuggets."

The two men froze.

"White man think Toughluck crazy old Eskimo," he whispered, moving his eyes from Reynolds to Porter and back again. "But not so crazy old."

The two executives saw a treasure lurking behind that wrinkled, shy, half-drunk Eskimo face. And if old Toughluck had no use for his big shiny nuggets way up there above the Arctic Circle, Reynolds and Porter just might find a way of relieving the poor man of the heavy burden of possession.

"You know, Toughluck," Reynolds said, slapping the native gently on the shoulder, "I see what you mean. Things like that aren't going to bring you more whales, are they?"

Toughluck shook his head. "Me just Eskimo."

Reynolds sipped his drink.

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His eyes moved to Porter's.

"Boy, I tell you, Tough-luck," Porter said, "I sure would like to see that nugget up close. You know, I was beginning to think all those stories about Alaska gold were fairy tales."

Toughluck laughed. He patted the photograph with the palm of his hand. "Kivalina too far for you," he said. "Anchorage for white people."

"When are you going back?" Reynolds asked.

"Have to wait for next week," Toughluck said. He drank more beer. Foam slurped down his chin and he wiped it off with his fingers. "Wien go just one time in week to Kivalina. Just small village."

"I guess you have to pay money here to buy food and a place to stay," Reynolds said. "It takes a lot of money to live in the city, doesn't it?"

Toughluck nodded.

"Tell you what," Reynolds said, holding Toughluck in a friendly grip. "How would you like to go to Kivalina now?"

The Eskimo didn't understand.

"A friend of ours has a plane," Reynolds explained, "and I know how to fly it. If we left early in the morning we could get you back to Kivalina tomorrow afternoon."

"You have plane?"

"My friend does," Reynolds said, nodding. "Two-engine."

"You come Kivalina?"

Reynolds smiled broadly.

"You come Kivalina," Toughluck said excitedly, "I show you big nuggets. You like that?"

Porter glanced at Reynolds and grinned. "Yes, we'd like that."

The next morning the two Texans picked up Toughluck at the Parsons Hotel on Third Avenue downtown and drove to Merrill Field where the private plane was parked. Reynolds submitted his flight plan and by 7:30 he had the Navajo in the air and headed north.

Anchorage to Kivalina is over 650 map miles. But the small plane had to fly around the high rugged Alaska Mountain Range and that added another 200 miles.

They flew to Fairbanks and refueled. Then they headed west to Nenana, crossed over Manley Hot Springs, followed the great Yukon River for about 150 miles, flew over Kokrine Hills, Koyukuk River, Waring Mountains, Kobuk River, Baird Mountains, Noatak River, Mulgrave Hills, and finally eased down to the gravel airstrip at Kivalina.

The village was located on the south bank of the Kivalina River where the fresh waters

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flowed into the Chukchi Sea. Only 140 people lived there.

A strong cold wind blew over the treeless country and the clapboard houses. Rusting oil drums lay scattered about. Paths and roads seemed to wander helter-skelter. Clothes on the children were ripped and torn.

Reynolds and Porter put on their good faces. Anchorage was bad enough. Kivalina was impossible.

Toughluck swung his arm. "Come," he said. "Go to gold nuggets."

The two men followed the old Eskimo like hungry puppies. The remote wilderness, once the site of incredible gold strikes, fed their imaginations: a little slick maneuvering and those gold nuggets would soon be in their hands.

Toughluck stopped at the river and pointed upstream to a bend in the bank. Ice edged out from shore: winter was coming.

"Big nuggets in river," Toughluck said, and grinned.

"In the river?" Reynolds said, his forehead creased.

"This all Eskimo land," Toughluck said. "That where we keep nuggets."

"Listen, friend," Reynolds said sternly, "you said you have big nuggets like the one in the picture. Now where are they?"

"In river."

"Where's the one in the picture?" Porter demanded.

"In river."

The white men stared at each other, their jaws tight.

"Me just Eskimo," Toughluck said. "Find big nugget, make picture, throw nugget back in river to keep safe. What old Eskimo want with gold, huh?"

"Listen, Toughluck—"

"I show you how to find nugget."

The two Texans waited.

"You stay in Kivalina all winter," Toughluck said. "River melt in spring. Then show you where find big nugget."

"Why, you dumb—"

"Me maybe crazy but not dumb," the Eskimo said, grinning.

Reynolds and Porter burned. They whirled in a show of vice-presidential dignity and then, eyes fixed straight ahead, they hurried back to town, hurried past the staring, smiling, giggling, laughing Eskimos, revved up the Navajo, roared down the gravel airstrip, and sped to the far horizon as fast as the twin-engines could take them.

Toughluck sauntered back to town. He watched the plane shrink into the long Alaska sky. He was home and he had saved the $168.00 fare for the Wien Consolidated Airlines flight. It worked every time.

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"The bitter years behind, the exciting years ahead . . ."

THE BITTER YEARS

by DANA LYON

The woman finished cleaning up the sink from her solitary meal—the chicken breast cooked in wine, the crisp avocado salad, the beaten biscuits that she had made herself, with enough left over to heat for breakfast—and now the little house was in perfect order. The sun, in this rustic mountain village that she had selected for her permanent home, would sink quickly behind the wooded hills, so that there was never a long protracted period of dusk, and now there would be only a few moments left before everything was shrouded in darkness. So she must take her final look of the day at the ground made ready for her new lawn and garden.

Tomorrow, the man Samuel had said; tomorrow the soil will be ready for the seed and then, God willing, you may have a decent lawn for a change. He was proud of his preparations; no one yet had been able to grow a satisfactory lawn in this rocky section of the hills. Many had tried and had succeeded in growing a few scraggly blades. But she was determined to achieve a beautiful lushness out there in back, and then she would buy some awnings and outdoor furniture and perhaps put in a little fountain; and when she got back from her trip she could sit outdoors all summer long and just bask in the beauty and quiet brought to life through her own efforts. During the winters she would travel: Mexico, South America, the Mediterranean; but in the summers she would enjoy the home and lawn and garden for which she had waited so long.

Still glancing out the window she saw a whisk of white leaping onto the dark loam of the readied earth. She was instantly alert, flying out the back door, screaming "Nemo! Nemo!" to her little cat which paid not the slightest attention because it had sunk to its belly in the soft damp soil. Unthinking, realizing only that the cat might sink all the way in, as in quicksand, she stepped into the

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dirt and found herself plunged into it almost to her knees, before her feet came to rest on the rocky hardness of the ground underneath.

"Damn!" she said to herself, and laughed. "Old fool that I am."

She pulled herself out of the foot-and-a-half depth of the loam, rescued the yowling cat, and plodded back into the house, there to strip and shower.

Oddly enough, she was pleased at the depth of the new soil. The man Samuel had done his work well—had obviously rototilled the rocky ground as well as he could and had then hauled in great loads of top soil, weed free and fertilized, now lying ready in the sun for tomorrow's fine grass seed. He hadn't cheated. He hadn't, as some garden workers might have done, merely put in a thin layer of dirt over the solid foundation, but had really prepared the grass for a lifetime of growth. (But he had still shaken his head, had still grumbled in the pessimistic manner of these mountainfolk who were too used to disappointment to tempt fate by hoping. "Grass seed just don't want to grow up here," he had muttered while he raked and smoothed, smoothed and raked. "Soil's empty. Air's too thin. Winter's too fierce." But he had kept on raking and smoothing, promising disaster but hoping in spite of himself.)

The woman smiled to herself, wiped herself dry from the shower, got into her night dress and lounging robe, washed the cat much to its enrangement (for who, it seemed to be saying, can wash a cat better than itself?) and went to her easy chair in front of the television set.

She was alone. And safe. Safe at last. Happy and comfortable. Rested. Rested for the first time in her life and with that wonderful world cruise waiting for her, after her years of vacationless labor. Only a few weeks ahead now, but time for her to see the new young grass begin to come up and to know that it would be full-fledged on her return months from now. She had never been as content, excited as a young girl, as she was now. The bitter years behind, the exciting years ahead.

She grew weary and exasperated with the television, for in this mountain fastness there were only two stations available and on one there was a rock group, splitting the air with the modern sounds of yelling and shouting, and on the other an old Western, making loud noises too but those of the past,

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shooting and shouting and galloping hither and yon.

She turned off the set and went to her desk drawer, pushing aside the small revolver she kept there because she was living alone, and took out a pile of brightly colored brochures, to look through again, dreaming and visualizing, living in the future, ignoring the past: the magnificent ship where she would have an outside cabin all to herself and could have days and nights of quiet leisure; England with its magnificent history; the continent, Paris, Venice, everywhere—even Crete—a cruise to last nearly a whole year. Above all, it was to be the first vacation of any kind in so many years that she couldn't even count them.

She gloated over the pictures, the colorful, impossible descriptions, and once again, as she had a dozen times before, took out the voluminous ticket, the directions, the receipt, the date of sailing, the pamphlets suggesting what kind of clothes to bring with her—all of it, everything, that had once been her impossible dream. Everything was now arranged for: Samuel to cut and water the new lawn, and care for Nemo; the post office to hold her mail (what mail?); Mr. Prescott, the one-man police department, to check her house periodically.

Everything in order, everything waiting. And finally—pure joy—there would be the trip down the mountain in the rickety old daily bus, the air flight to the city, the overnight stay in one of the big hotels, and then the taxi ride the next morning to the great white ship and all that it promised . . .

At first she did not hear the knock on the door. The house was quiet, the only sound that of Nemo purring at her feet; but she was lost in another world and the sound of the first knock did not penetrate.

It came again, and this time she heard it. Still lost, not even wondering who would be knocking after dusk had fallen, she went to the door and opened it, and saw a small man standing there.

"Yes?" she said, surprised but not yet apprehensive.

"Miss Kendrick?"

Prepared, yet not prepared, she held herself in the vise of total physical discipline. She did not flinch, nor did any expression appear on her face.

"No," she said quietly. "You must have the wrong place."

"I think not," said the man. He was wholly nondescript: five feet six or seven, thinning sandy hair, suit the same color, pale blue eyes.

"My name is Stella Nord-

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way," she said. "*Mrs.* Stella Nordway."

"Oh?" he said, smiling. "You've been married recently?"

"I have been a widow for ten years," she told him. "So you see, you are mistaken."

"May I come in?"

"No," and she started to close the door.

His face altered slightly. A flicker of fury, then almost instantly a mask of mediocrity that could totally obliterate him in a crowd. "I am an investigator," he said, "for the Halmut Bonding Company. They have employed me to find a woman named Norma Kendrick who embezzled more than $100,000 from her employers over the last seven years. They want you, Miss Kendrick. *And* the money."

She said, "You may come in," and opened the door a little wider. He slipped through, instantly found the most uncomfortable chair in the room, short and straight-backed, and sat on the edge of it—as if taking his ease on the sofa might have lulled him into a lack of alertness.

"You are mistaken," she said again, almost helplessly. "I am not—"

"I am a trained investigator," he said. "For the last twenty-three years. This much I know: you worked for the Sharpe Wholesale Hardware Company, as its head bookkeeper. A large and prosperous establishment. You were competent and reliable. There was only one peculiarity about you: during the last seven years you refused to take the three weeks' vacation you were entitled to every year—"

"But I—" she broke in, then bit the words back. He had deployed her into a near admission. "But," she corrected herself quickly, "I have nothing to do with all this, so you see—"

"You are Norma Kendrick," he said. "I can't help admitting that I am rather curious as to what made you suddenly turn into an embezzler. For years you had been taking care of your invalid father and doing your daily stint at the office, coming home to the same routine every night. Then suddenly you decided to help yourself to the company's money. At the end of the first year you realized you couldn't leave your books—they would have been an open admission to the substitute bookkeeper they'd have to assign in your absence. I was appalled that Mr. Sharpe had not been more curious as to why you wouldn't take your vacation each year, but he said he had trusted you

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completely, since you were the daughter of an old friend and had shown your competence and reliability; and moreover, you had explained your lack of vacations by saying you couldn't leave your father in order to go anywhere, and that you were desperately in need of extra money for your father's medical bills, so if Mr. Sharpe would just pay you what he would have paid your substitute, in addition to your regular salary, you would appreciate it."

The woman sat frozen, afraid to speak, afraid not to. Instead she listened. There had to be a loophole somewhere. "So?" she prodded him, and he looked surprised, perhaps because he had expected another denial from her.

"So instead of a vacation you would frequently take a long weekend, say from Thursday to Monday, or Friday to Tuesday, and during these periods you managed to set up your second identity as Stella Nordway. You wore a blonde wig, tinted glasses, more youthful clothes, and you bought this house. You also bought a single ticket for a world cruise. You did these things rather hurriedly, after seven years of dipping into the till, because not only had your father finally died, but the hardware company was about to be sold because the owner was ready to retire. This sale, of course, would entail a careful scrutiny of the books. Well, Miss Kendrick?"

Her mind fluttered.

"Are the police after me?" she said, in a final relinquishment to the inevitable.

He smiled. "Well, no. Not yet. As I said earlier, I work for the bonding company first, your employer second, and of course, as soon as you are located, then the law will step in. The police are also looking for you, but in a different direction. The bonding company will get their money—what's left of it—and the state will get its revenge. Your little house will go—"

He glanced around the neat attractive room and out the window at the dark sky where the stars shone clearly and cleanly in the mountain air. He sighed with pleasure. It would be a lovely retreat for him after too much of a lifetime spent in the city. "Your trip around the world—and how I envied you that—will have to go—"

She was becoming confused. Why weren't the police here? Why hadn't he notified Mr. Prescott, the one-man police force, that this town was harboring a fugitive? Why was this person here, just telling her these things and doing nothing

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about it? She knew she had lost her gamble, but she had known it was a gamble from the beginning. The bitterness was gall.

The little man spoke again, half smiling.

"Mrs. Nordway—" he began.

"Mrs. *Nordway?*" she echoed. "But you—you insist that I am Norma Kendrick—"

"You can be either one you please," he told her quietly. "It's up to you."

She sank into the nearest chair, completely confused by now, her confusion greater than her terror. "What do you mean?" she stammered.

"Well, just this. You see, you have more courage than I have. More ingenuity. More gambling spirit. I have been tied to a sickly wife for too many years, just as you were tied to your father, and the more I looked after her, the worse her temper grew. She hated being dependent on me. There was no way I could earn enough money for escape. I am what I am. I have saved my company many thousands of dollars, perhaps millions, but my salary remains unimpressive . . . So what is your freedom worth, Mrs. Nordway?—or should I say Miss Kendrick? Whatever is left of the money you stole?"

She sat in an icy cocoon.

Not fear this time, but rage. She could understand the need for the law to make her pay—that was the consequence of losing her gamble; but to be robbed of everything she had hoped for and worked for and risked her freedom for by this oily inconsequential little opportunist sitting there so smugly—*that* was beyond acceptance.

She stood up. "There is not much money left," she said, careful to keep her voice noncommittal, "after buying the house and my cruise ticket. I would be left destitute."

"I'll take the house off your hands," he said lightly, now that he was winning, "and you can return your cruise ticket. Or, better still, let *me* have it—"

"I don't believe it's transferable," she said, almost absently. "Wait just a minute, I have it right here—" In moving toward her desk she paused for a moment in front of the window, looking out. "How did you get here?" she asked in the same absent voice. "I don't see your car outside."

"I left it down the street a ways," he said, "in front of the church. Under the circumstances it didn't seem like a good idea to let anyone know you'd had a visitor."

"I see," she said, and moved on to her desk where she rummaged around for a mo-

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ment, picked up what she wanted, and held it close to the folds of her lounging robe. She remembered, for only an instant, that there were neighbors not too far away, so she moved quietly, unobtrusively, over to the television set.

"Do you like Westerns, Mr.—?"

"Jordan," he said automatically. "Why, I—" His voice sounded bewildered. Television? Now?

She turned on the volume control, high, and the crashing sound of cowboys still whooping it up with gun and horse filled the room. She lifted the small gun she was holding, and as he stared at her in his brief final moment of comprehension, she pointed it at him and shot him between the eyes.

There was no place to hide the body. The problem was as simple as that. No cellar in this tiny house; the ground too hard and rocky for digging; no car for she had never learned to drive—no place at all to hide this neat little corpse with the small round hole in the center of its forehead.

She sat. She did not regret her action, knowing that even if she had realized ahead of time the complications in concealing her act, she would have shot him just the same. Rage had impelled her—not greed, not fear, not impulse—just an outraged need to kill this person, this thing, who was going to destroy her entire life and future for his own grasping ends.

She left him there on the living-room rug where he had quietly toppled from his chair—there was little blood—and moved into the kitchen, staring out the back window at her cherished little garden, at the prepared soil for the new lawn in which she had such high hopes. She was numb with grief at the thought of all her bright plans for the future now seemingly destroyed. Disintegrated. Dead as the little man in the other room

She stared out through the window at the black night, motionless.

The lawn. The soil. Eighteen inches of black pulverized dirt above rocky hardness. A foot and a half. Deeper really than it actually needed to be. Deep enough? For a little man stretched out flat? With grass seed planted over him and growing into solid sod?

The dirt was very soft and slightly damp. She waited by the window in the dark, so that the neighbors would think she had gone to bed, watching the few scattered lights go out, one by one. This was a town for

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early sleep and early rising, and she must wait no longer than she had to . . .

At last the night was black and still. Still as death. She went into her back yard and dug up a space in the soft prepared soil the right size for the little man—though of course only eighteen inches deep—being very careful that the spade made no sound against the harder earth. Her eyes were accustomed by now to the gloom whose only light was cast by the pale stars, and her movements were as silent as the night.

She brought the little man out to the back yard and laid him in his grave, arms decorously against his sides, and started to cover him with earth. She paused. He must lie flat, as flat as possible, for Samuel might want to rake and roll the dirt once more and there must be no chance of his tools going deep enough to strike something solid. It seemed to her that the little man's shoulders were bunched together, the way she had him placed; he must lie flatter, flatter.

The grave she had dug was wide but not deep, more space on either side of him than just above him. She tried again, stretching his arms out wide, at right angles to his body—ah, this was better, this was as flat as he would go. Now she could cover him and forget him. Soon, soon, the grass would flourish above him, entangle itself in its own roots, cover him forever, his identity, his total being now lost in other places. But not here.

Not here.

She went back into the house and slept. Her future was again safe. . .

It was not until some time later that she knew her plans were meaningless. Day by day she watched her rear lawn and waited with anticipation for the first green blades to rise, almost forgetting what lay beneath them. And the grass did come up. But not very well. It was as Samuel had said, she thought in despair; no lawn would grow decently in these mountains of rocks and barren soil and bitter winters. But the blades did come up, struggling to reach the sun, a patch here, a patch there, so that perhaps there might be some hope after all.

One morning, after a night of soft summer rain, she looked out at her lawn and saw that there was a change; for in the center of it now was a great stand of lush green grass, beautiful and thick and bright, and it was in the form of a cross, growing and flourishing amidst the meager struggles of a

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few pale blades, growing and flourishing, burgeoning in the soft gentle breezes and the warm healing sun. Growing and flourishing.

So that is why the people of the little town wonder about the crazy old woman who mows her foolish struggling lawn twice a week, every week. Not since the first blades came up did she ever leave her house; not once was she ever away from home, even for a brief vacation; not once in the long years that followed did she ever miss the appointed time, rain or shine, spring or fall, when she must cut her lawn.

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another ALL-NEW issue!

11 novelets and short stories by

EVAN HUNTER *(his newest story)*
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a *NEW* detective story by

JOHN PIERCE

You will find a special "slant" to this story . . . What we usually admire in a fictional detective is what he or she does — mentally, physically, or psychologically. We repeat: what he or she does. Please keep that in mind as you read John Pierce's newest story, and apply it to ex-Inspector Seal, an engaging character who will surely have other tales to tell — we hope . . .

EXERCISE NUMBER ONE

by JOHN PIERCE

Ex-Inspector Seal found it by accident one morning. A deluge had washed out his golf match and the others of the foursome had departed.

He embarked on a tour of idle exploration and in time found himself in a little-known alcove loosely called, as he was later told, "the library." No one could say how the books had got there; few seemed to have been opened or even touched since finding their way to the shelves, or so the film of dust suggested. Understandably. A sad, frayed assemblage it was, filling three shelves beyond the coat racks and the lost-and-found cubicle.

There were superannuated guidebooks to Europe and lady fictionists of the Edwardian day; unwanted offerings of the various book clubs and the spring cleanure of random collections. A Zane Grey with the first chapter missing and Volume II of Grant's memoirs; the recollections (privately printed) of someone's grandfather and a Basic Spanish Grammar. Books, in short, of no more collective zest than the old clothing one "donates" to the Salvation Army.

Here and there were felicitous exceptions, and Seal's find was a pleasant one. He had not seen a copy in a quarter of a century. He opened it with nostalgia, took it happily back

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to the walnut lounge overlooking the fifth and ninth greens of the golf course, and reclined in a soft leather chair, his long legs outstretched.

On the course the gray rain raked the fairways and formed lakelets on the proud greens; it sluiced the picture windows and so permeated the atmosphere as to dampen the very connotation of "Country Club."

Rain on. He had retired; he was trim and in good health at 46. A spinster aunt's demise had solved his economic problems. Ahead lay nearly half a lifetime of rainstorms he did not have to walk through, telephones he did not have to answer. If not golf today, then tomorrow—or next week.

He ordered a cold beer from the waiter, touched foam from his pencil mustache, and fell to the familiar book.

Then footsteps on the oriental carpetry knelled a presence, and a voice spoke.

"Ah, Inspector. Or what do we call you now you're pastured?"

Seal greeted Albert Claxton, a well-to-do realtor, a recent widower, and an old golfing mate. He closed his book on a forefinger.

"Inspector emeritus, I suppose," he answered. "Anything you want to call me."

Claxton fell into a chair opposite and drummed restless fingers on the leather arms. "I came out in spite of the rain. Thought something miraculous might occur. Doesn't much look like it, does it? Don't tell me you've found something worth reading in *that* library."

"An old friend," Seal answered, indicating the volume. Someone had spilled a beverage on it or left it by an open window during a rain. The front cover was bent and mottled and the edges of the pages were stained.

"May I see?"

Seal held the book up so that its title was visible. It was *Wake Up and Live*, a guide to a more orderly life written by one Dorothea Brande in the 1930's.

"Shades of my salad days, I remember that book! Had a phenomenal sale, didn't it? Good heavens, Seal. You?"

"I?"

"I mean, surely you're beyond that stage."

"What stage, Albert?"

"Oh, fiddlesticks, overhauling yourself with how-to-do-its."

"I'm only reminiscing. There was, though, a time in college when I made a most serious study of Miss Brande's book."

"And did it get your life straightened out?"

Seal smiled. "I'm just what

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you see here, regrettably. A retired cop looking wistfully at a golf course, waiting for the rain to end."

Claxton laughed. "Well, I'm that, or half of it, and without studying the twelve or fifteen steps to self-improvement. I'm sorry. I'm joking, of course. I don't know what it was got me turned against these chiropractors of the mind. I suppose it was my wife: if it wasn't Dale Carnegie it was Norman Vincent Peale or Marcus Aurelius or St. Augustine; and if not them, some bloody health-food regimen or yoga exercises or *The Stock Market Made Easy*, and so on. On every wall in the house she had these pages pinned up—lists and reminders and sets of rules: do this, don't do that, smile; instructions from Emerson and Montaigne followed by huge oversized exclamation points."

"No more useless, fundamentally, than hitting a golf ball around a former sheep meadow."

"I contradict you. Golf, treated as a game, relaxes you. Contrarily, this mania of hers kept her perpetually harassed with those barbed little guilts because she could not, each day, score a hundred with quick and ready solutions. Kept a wall chart, checked entries every evening. Yes, no, et cetera. It cluttered up her poor soul, rest her, not to mention the state the house got into. Poor Clara," he added dolefully, drumming nervous fingers and gazing bleakly at the rain.

"A lovely woman," said Seal.

"Yes. Forgive me. It's this weather. A week of this now, and golf does get my mind off my petty problems. No, I'll tell you what—let me find the wellspring of my reservations. I think—I *know*—that living is ninety percent effort, toil, joy or disappointment and the grace to accept either. And I open one of these success tomes by some bird who's got life all categorized and made easy—how to be wise, how to be popular, how to sell, how to draw every eye as you walk into a room, how to make a million dollars without working hard or working at all—and I wonder how much the purveyors of this pabulum have themselves achieved. I wonder seriously about Monsieur Montaigne—how popular and successful and generous, how contented *he* really was, and so on. I should read a life of him some day. Why, I don't know. Forget it. Forgive me. I'm bored stiff by this detestable rain."

Seal had listened thoughtfully. "Your point's well taken.

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But Dorothea Brande, in her book, only offers a few common-sense guideposts, or let's say, suggestions toward getting a bit of discipline or coherence into one's life. *She* can't revamp you. Her *book* can't. But by *trying* the disciplines she lays out, by seriously sticking to them over a period—well, what's to lose?"

"I don't know. Somehow it all seems so fathomless in this age of the psychoanalytic couch. All right, here's one: tell me this. Can you document out of your experience one single, concrete, specific instance of anyone you know having had his or her life changed significantly by the poring over of one of these hornbooks, these catechisms toward the richer and fuller life?"

Seal shrugged. "Any minister, I'd say."

"Unfair," protested Claxton. "Religion is something else. The reference is not to the Bible, but to these works that fill whole sections of a bookshop and full-page advertisements in the Sunday papers and magazines. Be honest now, can you name just one?"

"Yes, I can, Albert. Very graphically."

"Please do so."

"Very well. Putting to use just one sentence out of this very book I'm holding, I not only solved my first crime but rather pompously like to think I gave—or helped Miss Brande give—a whole new turn to a young life that was going badly out of alignment. Coincidentally you know who the man is. You'd fall out of your chair if I named him So obviously I won't. Suffice to say he's one of our most influential and community-minded citizens with a couple of inches in *Who's Who* and wealth not even his grandchildren will be able to sensibly dissipate."

"Seriously?" asked Claxton.

"Oh, very."

"Amazing," said Claxton, and signaling the waiter he ordered two glasses of draft. "Proceed then, Emeritus. You've got me hooked."

Seal fondled the book, contemplated the rain, and began. . .

"College days—my senior year. A few weeks prior to Pearl Harbor and all the excitement and go-to-hell generated by the surety that we were in for a righteous war. You remember. Under which circumstances college wasn't really a very educational place. Lots of fun, though. Great football games and splendid formal dances to the music of the big bands, a lifetime of tomfoolery in every frat and sorority house and

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every dorm. Lots of amateurish drinking, pretty girls everywhere, and a sense of patriotism that unified.

"I'd picked up an old car at home that summer. Bought it for a song and in the garage got it to where it would run. Took it down completely, put new rings in, ground the valves, prowled the junk yards for a generator, speedometer cable, muffler, and whatever. Lined the brakes, new seat covers, new paint job, the whole bit.

"I was quite proud of it and since few students had cars in those days I can't say it didn't give me new popularity. Or, as one contemporary remarked: 'Seal's got more friends than he can fit into his car.' We'd take off on long football jaunts, and on campus I'd lend it to the fraternity brothers with co-eds to impress, and so on. I daresay many an ex-maiden well remembers that auto of mine. It got a lot of strange mileage."

Seal sipped from his beer stein.

"Alas, it got stolen one night. Abandoned, smashed up against a pine tree off a farm road two or three miles out of town. It was the night of a Thursday evening pep rally preceding a Saturday football classic—homecoming week with all the folderol and horseplay: chauvinist decorations, pajama parades, girls pouring in from the outlands along with the old grads, Jan Savitt's orchestra sheduled for the dance set—wholesale foolishness.

"We all swarmed to the pep rally and got suitably hyped up to the yelling and the thunder of the band. We paraded through town and greased the railroad tracks and finally—a gang of us—adjourned to a roadhouse outside town for refreshments.

"I didn't drink competently in those days. I left fairly early and processed off to bed in my single room on the third floor of the Sigma house, keys, change, and broken comb on the table beside my bed. Early in the morning there was a phone call from the law. They'd come across my car and a wrecker had towed it to a nearby garage.

"I went yawning and cursing for a look. Not a hopeless wreck, but beyond my financial means to repair—radiator in on top of the motor, fender crumpled, wheels knocked out of line. I had only liability and accident insurance, but nothing in the policy, as I found out, covered theft.

"So there I was. Nobody hurt, apparently, but not a way in God's world of ever knowing which of my eighty-six good brothers in that frat house had

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come in and taken my keys and gone out for a drunken spin.

"Burned up? You bet I was. Even so, I lacked the heart to inspire the police to a too-diligent hunt for the culprit. I hoped he'd come forward, but I didn't want to see anyone jailed or expelled from school. What could I do? Write it off and learn to walk again. Oh, cruel, cruel world.

"Back at the frat house I brooded around and settled at last in the downstairs music room and listened to a few records. I had in hand my paperback copy of this book I'm holding. Anything for distraction, and I had time to kill until the library opened at ten. I had books to check out and research to do for a paper I'd put off writing.

"Nearly everyone was off at class that Friday morning, but I wasn't alone in the room. Stretched out on a sofa feeling wretched was a good brother we'll call Foggy. Silent and suffering from last night's celebration. A good fellow, Foggy, a big, shapeless, bulky chap, personable, outgoing, big-hearted, but not quite as popular as he'd once been. He'd relaxed himself into some bad habits that had antagonized—borrowing money he didn't pay back, waking people up at night after a drinkfest, smoking a pack of cigarettes a day without ever buying them—that kind of thing. So there he lay, open-eyed and uncommunicative, sweating it out.

"Joined by a second brother. Call him Rusty. He'd slept through a class. Commiserated with me on the car's loss, asked if there was any chance of nailing the criminal. Then he noticed the book, just as you have this morning, and glanced through it. Wanted to know if it 'worked.'

"Well, how did I know? I'd only bought it Wednesday and was just then getting underway with my assault on self-improvement. Schedules drawn up, portions of the book underscored—a massive, all-out effort planned.

" 'Hell,' Rusty said, tossing the book back to me, 'I can't even get to class on time much less follow all those damn rules.'

"I said, 'Yeah, Rusty, but maybe if you *would* follow her rules, you *would* get to class. That's what the whole thing's all about.'

" 'You give it a try then,' he answered. 'If it works for you I'll borrow it.'

"Quite plainly he was not enthusiastic, so we talked about other things for half an hour, or until I saw by my watch that it was ten o'clock.

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" 'I've got to run up to the library,' I told him. 'Can't talk any more.'

" 'I hope they nail him—whoever smashed your car, I mean.'

"I didn't answer. I started out. Abruptly Foggy came off his bed of pain. 'You walking up, Seal? Good, I'll walk with you.' He followed me out and down the steps outside.

"Well. He was one of two things during that walk. Either he was still tanked up from last night or immensely refreshed by his lie-down. Whatever it was, he began talking my damn left ear off. By which I mean, there gushed from him during the next ten or fifteen minutes the most rampageous farrago of disconnected eclecticity you're apt to hear this side of a Women's Club.

"He was flunking that profanity, Principles of Economics; he must have been mad to have picked economics as a minor anyway. His girl Blanche was coming down tomorrow for the dances and the game. He'd met her at a party after the Tech game; talk about an eager woman, she was it. Thence followed a clinical cataract of analyses covering her anatomical merits.

"I had no comment on this subject.

"Saturday's game, he went on, promised sheerest nightmare. Fensterhaven, our ace halfback, had re-injured his left ankle in scrimmage yesterday and had to be carried off the field. Our stellar tackle, MacEachern, had the flu. Meanwhile, Wingfeldt, reserve fullback, had gone after a counterman in the College Inn with a crowbar and been ejected from school. We'd no business playing Rose Bowl teams like Alabama anyway. They'd beat us by fifty points or his name wasn't Foggy.

" 'Know why we play 'em? I'll tell you,' he expostulated. 'Money. M-O-N-E-Y. It's the only sport we have that makes a nickel for the college. Lose money on football and we'll be down to intramural tennis as our major sport. Big deal.'

"I said nothing.

"Another supply ship had been torpedoed, said the radio. We, the United States, ought to get off our tail ends, declare war, and get it over with. How expect anyone to study with all this hanging fire—black headlines and the Nazi wolfpack sinking everything in sight. Jan Savitt's dance band, due tomorrow. He'd not say he didn't like Savitt but try dancing sensibly to that shuffle beat. *Jit*terbugs, *they* could handle it, but how about the poor ordinary foxtrotting slob. He equated the Savitt shuffle to the left hand

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on a boogie-woogie piano. They were one of a piece, once you thought it over. How come we never got Harry James or one of the Dorseys or Glenn Miller? We paid enough. Boy, that Social Committee, speaking of farce.

"I waited for a light to change. We crossed a street.

"How about what they did to Grimmett last night? continued Foggy. Ran a garden hose up the wall into his second-floor window and in under the covers from the foot of his bed. Waited for him to come stumbling in from the roadhouse and get to bed, then turned on the water full blast from the spigot outside. Talk about one mad wet rooster. Did I have a date coming for the dances? Was Marie coming down?

"I said, 'No.'

"That was, I should say here, the first word I'd uttered since we left the fraternity house.

"He seemed shocked. *'No?* I thought she was. Look, you want a date, I can get you one, this little roommate of Blanche's.'

" 'No thanks,' I answered.

"He then went into a familiar routine, patting concertedly at all his pockets for the cigarettes he knew damn well he didn't have; patted his shirt, his side pockets, his wide hips, then his shirt again. 'You wouldn't, ah, uh, you wouldn't have an extra cigarette on you, would you, buddy? Must have left mine on the—'

"I handed him my pack sans comment, repocketed it after he'd taken not one but three, and we walked on, past the Tiger Theater. On a wall poster, looking mysterious, was Hedy Lamarr.

" 'Hedy Lamarr,' commented Foggy, 'laws were wanted against women like her. They shouldn't even show her pictures in a college town. Try looking at her for two hours and then do any studying.'

"He faltered, wanting my opinion. I offered none.

" 'Well, don't say I haven't tried,' he said sourly. 'To be sociable.'

"We walked a block in silence and he started in again. I sensed, to my discomfort, a growing note of desperation in his monologue, an incoherent globality. He touched on the New York Yankees, on DiMaggio's hitting streak, on his objections to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He dissected a student he could not abide and the poor quality of food at an off-campus restaurant. Mahatma Gandhi, the British in North Africa, World Communism, *Citizen Kane*, and a wild motley of topics that came to mind.

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" 'Did you know, for example, that in 1820 there were nineteen million bison on the western plains; by 1890 we'd reduced the number to one thousand? Read it in a book the other day.' He looked to me for comment or challenge. I had none. That seemed to do it. 'What the hell's wrong with you anyway?' he demanded. 'You want me to cross the street and walk over there? What's wrong with you?'

"I said, 'Nothing.'

" 'The hell there isn't,' he retorted. 'I heard you talking to Rusty—heard the whole conversation. Talking a mile a minute, and all the way up here I've been trying to make civil conversation and you won't say a damned word.'

"I didn't answer.

" 'I know what it is,' he charged. 'You made that snob honor society and you're too good for me. That's it, isn't it?'

" 'No.'

" 'Well, what is it then? I'm asking you for the last time. Are you going to tell me what it is?'

" 'It's nothing, Foggy.'

"He stopped cold on the sidewalk. He was furious. 'Okay, then, brother,' he said acidly. 'That's the way you want it, that's how it'll be.'

"I did not answer. I turned and went up the steps to the library, leaving him. There goes *that* friendship, I said to myself."

Seal emptied his beer glass and watched the rain.

"You gave him pretty good provocation, I should say," Claxton ventured. "I mean, it sounds like a pretty effective freeze job. That is, you do make yourself sound like a cold stick. Poor fellow did have a hangover."

"No one at the age of nineteen has that big a hangover," Seal said. "Admitted, 'freeze' was a word that came into wide usage that day."

"I'm sorry. I've interrupted," Claxton said. He motioned for the waiter again. Seal continued . . .

"I found the books I wanted. It took thirty minutes or so. I checked them out and came out of the library. There sat Foggy on a bench under a maple tree. It didn't bode well. Pushed hard, he did have a temper, and my disquieting first thought was that he'd been out there all that time fanning up his anger and was now set to make something out of it—something physical—and never think he wasn't big enough to stretch me out with one sweep of his ham hand.

" 'Oh, Lord,' I thought, and tried to pass him by. He stood

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up. He said, 'Sorry I lost my temper, old man. These courses I'm flunking and all.'

"I said nothing and we went back toward the main drag where they were stringing a banner, *BEAT ALABAMA*, across the intersection. What, really, did Foggy want with me?

" 'Old Doc Hennessey,' he said, making reference to an octogenarian professor of history. 'He gave a pop quiz the other Monday morning when he knew good and well nobody in the class had cracked a book. Collected the papers after ten minutes and took and threw them the hell in the air and said, "Everybody that sticks to the ceiling passes. Class dismissed." ' Foggy's laughter was uneasy.

"I said nothing.

" 'All *right*,' he blurted out. 'So I took your damn car and piled it up. Tillotson and I killed a bottle and I went clear off my head and got the wild idea to go and roust out this waitress I know that lives in Clarksville.'

"I didn't answer.

" 'I said I *took* it, Seal, I *did* it. I'm *admitting* it, see, see me dance? I'm ready to do anything you want toward putting it back in shape. I'll write home for money. I'll get a job. Okay? Is that okay?'

" 'Okay, Foggy.'

"We walked on half a block in silence.

"He said, 'All right, then, but I'll tell you one thing. I've confessed, I'm apologizing, I was looped, but if you think you're going to work this sulk on me the rest of the year like some runny-nosed little ten-year-old, buddy, you've picked the wrong boy.'

"The clock in the administration tower finished chiming eleven.

" 'No need writing home, Foggy,' I said then. 'You've got a valid driver's license. It's well known I've let practically everyone use the car, you included. All you have to do is go down with me to the insurance people and tell them you were driving it and they'll give me enough to cover the repair bill.'

" 'Good enough,' he said. 'But that's still not enough, though. Not for me. I've gotten a bad enough reputation. What I'll do, I'll stand up in the dining room at lunch today and admit to everyone, publicly, that I took your car. How does that sound?'

" 'That's up to you if you want to, Foggy.'

" 'All right, then. And you're not P.O.'d any more?'

" 'I never was, Foggy.'

" 'Oh, my God, just listen.

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That freeze job you put on me. Look, just tell me this, will you, for my own private, secret information. How did you know it was me? You mean you were still awake when I came in there and snitched the keys? Did someone see me driving it at two in the morning and tell you?'

" 'Nope,' I said. 'Neither one. I hadn't the vaguest idea it was you. I hadn't a clue to who it was.'

" 'The hell you didn't.'

" 'I didn't, Foggy. Swear on a Bible.'

" '*How* then? Why the sphinx act all this time?'

"I said, 'You heard Rusty and me talking, the whole conversation. We were talking about this paperback book I've got right here in my hand—*Wake Up and Live.* I told him I was just getting started on its program. Here it is. Chapter Eleven, Section Two, 'The Twelve Disciplines,' Exercise Number One: ". . . spend an hour every day without saying anything except in answer to direct questions." Which hour began at ten sharp just as we left the music room and concluded the moment the tower clock chimed eleven. Sorry you had to be my first victim. Your conclusion, that I had you tagged, was all your own.'

" 'Well, you dirty—' Foggy said, but he was laughing."

As did Claxton, putting down his glass. "Touche. Point proved. Amazing."

"Not nearly as amazing as what happened next," Seal said. "At lunch Foggy addressed the brotherhood and told the complete story of the freeze, and by that night they'd gone up to the bookstores and cleaned out every copy in stock. For two weeks it was frightful around there. Everyone in the house observing his own hour of that first exercise; you couldn't carry on a sensible conversation to save your soul."

He paused and regarded Claxton. "Yes, I still see the question in your eyes. How did *I* do with the program. Not very well, I'm afraid. It seems somebody stole my copy of the book."

"But I doubt it was Foggy," smiled Claxton.

"I don't know," Seal mused. "Sometimes I wonder. Foggy? Two or three times a *Who's Who* millionaire. Me, without my copy? A worn-out retired cop, golf clubs at the ready, waiting for the rain to stop. Yes, it could have been Foggy."

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a *NEW* Appleby detective story by

MICHAEL INNES

first publication in the United States

It is more than ten years since we last offered you a new Michael Innes story about Inspector Appleby (more recently the Commissioner of Metropolitan Police, and still more recently, Sir John Appleby). Surely that has been much too long a time, and we are delighted to remedy, however belatedly, this unintended neglect.

In his newest adventure the now-retired Sir John Appleby finds himself a member of a bachelor-type fishing party. His companions are a choice lot: a successful playwright whose fame is declining; his disloyal publisher; a venomous drama critic; and a tycoon with more than a fondness for the ladies.

Now, Appleby liked fishing; but he liked "odd situations" even more — and this "fishing murder" was an odd situation indeed. As in one of the playwright's own dramas, here are comedy and tragedy, the two faces of the theater — and the two faces of Michael Innes' sophisticated style . . .

COMEDY OF DISCOMFITURE

by MICHAEL INNES

In Scotland, trout fishing, almost as much as deerstalking and grouse shooting, is an amusement for wealthy men. Appleby was not particularly wealthy. From a modest station he had risen to be London's Commissioner of Metropolitan Police—a mouthful which his children, accurately enough, had turned into better and briefer English as Top Cop.

Top Cop's job turning out, predictably, to be more administrative than was at all enlivening, Appleby had retired

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from it earlier than need be, and now lived as an unassuming country gentleman on a small estate, the property of his wife, in the south of England. This, very happily, had proved not incompatible with getting into odd situations. As a country gentleman he also, of course, liked fishing.

So he had accepted Vivarini's invitation to bring a rod to Dunwinnie, although he didn't really know the celebrated playwright particularly well. Now here he was, cheek by jowl with four other piscatory enthusiasts in what had once been a crofter's cottage. Crofters, and all such humbly independent tillers of the soil, had almost vanished from this part of the Scottish Highlands. Whether in small patches or in large, the region had been turned into holiday terrain for rich men.

Appleby didn't brood on this. At least the hunting boxes and shooting lodges were, like everything else, thin on the ground. From the cottage one saw only the river—a brawling flood interspersed with still-seeming pools, brown from the peat and with trout enough—with an abandoned lambing hut on its farther bank, and then the moorland that stretched away to the remote line of the Grampians. Dr. Johnson, Appleby remembered, had once surveyed this scene and disliked it. *A wide extent of hopeless sterility*, he had written down. *Quickened only with one sullen power of useless vegetation.* That had been the heather.

There was a brushing sound in the heather now. Appleby looked up from his task of cleaning fish for supper, and saw that his host was returning. Vivarini had been the last to leave the water. He seemed to be a keen angler. In his stained waders, his Balmoral bonnet festooned with dry-flies, and with his respectably battered old creel, he certainly looked the part. But perhaps the playwright had enough of the actor in him for that. Snobbery and expensive rural diversions are inextricably tied up together in Britain, and in pursuit of some elusive social status men will go fox hunting who in their hearts are terrified at the sight of a horse. Perhaps Vivarini with his costly stretch of trout stream was a little like that.

Very rightly, Appleby felt mean at harboring this thought, particularly as Vivarini looked so far from well. Even in the twilight now falling like an elfin gossamer over these haunted lands one could distinguish that about the man. Perhaps it was simply that he was under some

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sort of nervous strain. Appleby knew nothing about the playwright's London way of life, but there could well be things he wanted to get away from. A setup like this at Dunwinnie—a small all-male society gathered for a secluded holiday on a bachelor basis—might well have been planned as wholesome relief by a man rather too much involved in something altogether different.

"Cloud coming up," Vivarini said, "and that breeze from the west stiffening. Makes casting tricky. I decided to stay with Black Gnat, by the way." He indicated the fly still on the end of his line. "A mistake, probably. Not sultry enough, eh?"

Clifford Childrey, ensconced with a three-day-old copy of the *Scotsman* on a bench beside the cottage door, glanced up—not at Vivarini but at Appleby—and then resumed his reading. He was Vivarini's publisher. A large and ruddy outdoors man, he had no need whatever to look a part.

"You deserve a drink, Vivarini," Appleby said.

"Not so much as you do, sweating away as cook. I'll see to it. Sherry, I suppose? And you, Cliff?"

"Sherry." Childrey momentarily lowered his newspaper. "Don't know about the other two. They've gone downstream to swim."

"Right. I do like this American make." Vivarini had leaned his rod against the cottage's low thatched roof. "No more than five ounces to the six feet. Flog the water all day with it."

"Umph." This response came from behind the *Scotsman*, which had been raised again. But the *Scotsman* was tossed to the ground when Vivarini had entered the cottage.

"No need to be supercilious," Appleby said.

"I've been nothing of the kind."

Appleby was amused. "If 'umph' isn't supercilious, I don't know what is."

"Well, well—Freddie Vivarini and I have been chums for a long time." Childrey chuckled comfortably. "A damned odd lot writers are, Appleby. I've spent my life trying to do business with them. Novelists are the worst, of course, but dramatists run them a close second. Always getting things up and trying out roles. What they call *personas*, I suppose. Thingamies, really. Chimeras."

"You mean chameleons."

"That's right. No reliable personal identity. Shelley said something about it. Right up his own street."

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"Keats. You think our host is playing at being a sportsman?"

"Oh, at that and lots of other things. What he's run on all his life has been folding up on him. Unsuccessful literary man."

"Unsuccessful?"

"Of course he's made a fortune. But that's what he's taken to calling himself. You're meant to regard it ironically. Uneasy joke, all the same." Childrey checked himself and got to his feet, perhaps aware of talking too casually about his host. "I'll start that grill for you," he said. "I see you'll need it soon."

As if in one of Vivarini's own neat plays, Childrey's exit line brought the subject of his late remarks promptly onstage again. Vivarini was bearing glasses and a bottle which, even in the gloaming, could be seen as lightly frosted. The cottage was not wholly comfortless. Warmth was laid on for chilly evenings, and there was hot water and a refrigerator and a compendious affair for cooking any way you liked, all served by a few cylinders of butane trundled across the moor on a vehicle like a young tank.

Not that their actual culinary regime wasn't simple enough. Elderly Englishmen of the sort gathered at Dunwinnie rather enjoy pretending to be public-schoolboys still, toasting crumpets or bloaters before a study fire. Of course there are limits, and when it is a matter of a glass of dry sherry or opening a bottle of hock, they don't expect the stuff to reach their palate other than at the temperature it should.

Nor do they care to couch in straw. Appleby was just reflecting that the cottage's bunks had certainly come from an expensive shop when he became aware that his host, uncorked bottle in hand, was laughing cheerfully.

"I heard the old ruffian," Vivarini said. "Trying out roles, indeed! Well, what if I am?"

"What, indeed? I myself shall remain grateful to you. This is a delightful spot."

"My dear Appleby, how nice of you to say so. But I do enjoy fishing, as a matter of fact. And—do you know?—as far as renting the cottage and this stretch of river goes, it was actually one of these chaps who egged me on. Positively ran me into it! But I won't say which." Vivarini was laughing again—although with the effect, Appleby thought, of a man not wholly at ease. "No names, no pack drill. Ah, here come Mervyn and Ralph."

Appleby couldn't afterward

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remember—not even with a dead body to prompt him—who at the supper table had introduced the topic of crime. Perhaps it had been Ralph Halberd, since Halberd was one of that not inconsiderable number of millionaires to have suffered the theft of some enormously valuable pictures. This might have given Halberd an interest at least in burglars, although his line—besides owning shipping lines and luxury hotels—was a large if capricious patronage of artists expressing themselves in mediums more harmless than thermal lances and gelignite.

Perhaps it had been Mervyn Gryde who wrote theatrical notices for newspapers, thus being dignified with the title of "drama critic" as a result; and the kind of plays he seemed chiefly to favor were, to Appleby's mind, so full of violence and depravity that crime might be supposed his natural element.

Or it might have been Vivarini himself. Certainly it had been he who, exercising a host's authority, had insisted on Appleby's recounting his own part in certain criminal *causes celebres*. But it had been left to Childrey, toward the end of the evening, to insist with a certain flamboyance on toasting the retired Metropolitan Commissioner as the finest detective intelligence in Britain. The hock, Appleby thought, was a great deal too good for the toast; it had in fact been Halberd's contribution to the housekeeping and was quite superb. But he acknowledged the compliment in due form, and not long afterward the company decided to go to bed.

Rather to his surprise, Appleby found himself obscurely relieved that the day was over. Everyone had been amiable enough. But had something been stirring beneath the talk, the relaxed gestures, the small companionable-seeming silences?

As he dropped to sleep, Appleby found himself thinking of the deep still pools into which the Dunwinnie tumbled here and there on its hurrying and sparkling scramble toward the sea. Beneath those calm surfaces, whose only movement seemed to be the lovely concentric ripples from a rising trout, a strong current flowed . . .

He had a nightmare, a thing unusual for him. Perhaps it was occasioned by one of the yarns he had been inveigled into telling at the supper table of his early and sometimes perilous days in the C.I.D. In his dream he had been pursuing gunmen

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down dark narrow corridors—and suddenly it had been the gunmen who were pursuing him. They caught him and tied him up. And then the chief gunman had advanced on him with a long whip and cracked it within an inch of his face. This was so unpleasant that Appleby, in his nightmare, told himself that here was a nightmare from which he had better wake up. So he woke up—not much perturbed, but taking thought, as one does, to remain awake until the same disagreeable situation was unlikely to be waiting for him

The wind had risen and its murmur had joined the river's murmur, but inside the cottage there wasn't a sound. The single-story building had been remodeled for its present purpose, and now consisted, like an ill-proportioned sandwich, of a large living room in the middle, with a very small bedroom at each end. The bedrooms contained little more than two bunks set one above the other. Childrey and Halberd shared one of these cabin-like places, and Appleby and Vivarini the other. Gryde slept on a cot in the living room These dispositions had been arrived at, whimsically, by drawing lots.

Appleby turned over cautiously, so as not to disturb Vivarini beneath him. Vivarini didn't stir. And Appleby suddenly knew he wasn't there. It was a simple matter of highly developed auditory alertness. Nobody was breathing, however lightly, in the bunk below.

The discovery ought not to have been worth a thought. A wakeful Vivarini might have elected for a breath of moorland air. Or he might have been prompted to go to the modest structure, some twenty yards from the cottage, known as the jakes. Despite these reflections, Appleby slipped quietly down from his bunk.

It was dark, then suddenly not dark, then dark again. But nobody had flashed a light. Outside, the sky must be a huddle of moving clouds, with a moon near the full sometimes breaking through. Vivarini's bunk was indeed unoccupied.

Appleby picked up a torch and went into the living room. Gryde seemed sound asleep—a little dark man, Appleby passingly told himself, coiled up like a snake. The door of the farther bedroom was closed, but the door giving direct on the moor was open. Appleby stepped outside, switching off the torch as he did so. He now knew why he was behaving in this way—like an alarmed nursemaid, he thought. It was because of what had happened in his dream.

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He glanced up at the clouds, and in the same moment the moon again came serenely through. The Dunwinnie rose into visibility before him, like a sudden outpouring of hoarded silver on dark cloth. On the other bank the lambing hut with its squat square chimney suggested some small humped creature with head warily erect. And something was moving there.

Momentarily Appleby saw this as a human figure slipping out of the door. Then he saw that it was only the door itself, swinging gently on its primitive wooden pivot. But no sound came from across the softly chattering flood, no sound that could have transformed itself into another sound in Appleby's dream.

There were stepping stones here, practicable enough for an active man. But they faded into darkness as Appleby looked; the moon had disappeared again. He had to switch on the flashlight or risk a ducking. He risked the ducking, although he could scarcely have told himself why he disliked the idea of being seen. When he reached the hut he reconnoitered the ground in front of it with a brief flicker close to the earth.

He felt for the door and pushed it fully open; it had been firmly shut the evening before, he remembered, with an old thirl-pin through the latch. Now he was looking into deep darkness indeed. The hut was no more than a square stone box with a slate roof; it had a fireplace more for the needs of the ewes and lambs than their shepherd; and in one wall—he couldn't recollect which—there was a window which had been boarded up. Treading softly, he moved through the door and listened.

No sound. No glimmer of light. Nothing to alert a single sense—unless it was a faint smell of old straw, the ghost of a faint smell of carbolic, of tar. Then suddenly, and straight in front of him at floor level, there was an illusive suggestion of light. All but imperceptibly the small glow grew; it was as if a stage electrician were operating a rheostat with infinite care. It grew to an oblong, with darkness as its frame. And now within the frame there was a picture. It was the portrait of Vivarini—but something had happened to his forehead. It was Vivarini himself.

Appleby was on his knees, his ear to the man's chest, his fingers exploring through a sportsjacket, a pajama coat. His face close to the still face, he flashed his torch into unclosing eyes, saw uncontracting pupils. He turned his head, gazed

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upward, and was looking at a square of dimly luminous cloud. Nothing more than the moon's reflected light filtering down the chimney had produced that moment of hideous melodrama. Vivarini himself at his typewriter, or pacing his study while dictating to his secretary, couldn't have done better. It was backward into the rude fireplace that Vivarini had crashed, a bullet in his brain. And hence the crack of that ugly whip in the other dimension of a dream. . .

Twenty minutes passed before Appleby re-entered the cottage. Arrived there, he didn't waste time. He gave Gryde a rough shake and rapped smartly on the closed bedroom door. Within seconds his three fellow-guests were around him, huddled in dressing gowns, dazed and blinking.

"Vivarini is dead," Appleby said quietly. "In the lambing hut. Shot through the head."

"My God—so he meant it!" This exclamation was Ralph Halberd's, and it was followed by a small silence.

"One of us," Appleby went on, apparently unheeding, "must get down to Balloch and telephone for a doctor and the police. But something a shade awkward comes first."

"Awkward?" It was Mervyn Gryde who repeated the word, and his voice had turned sharp.

"Well, yes. Let me explain. Or, rather, let me take up what Halberd has just said." Appleby turned to the millionaire. "*'My God—so he meant it!'* Just what made you say that?"

"Because he told me. He confided in me. It was a fearful shock." In the cold light of a hissing gas lamp, Halberd, who normally carried around with him an air as of imposing board rooms, looked uncertain and perplexed. "On Tuesday—the day we arrived. It was because I happened to see him unpack this thing and shove it under his shirts in that drawer over there. A pistol. It looked almost like a toy."

"Vivarini said he was going to kill himself with it?"

"Not that, exactly. Only that he had thoughts of it, and couldn't bring himself not to carry the weapon round with him."

"Did he give any reason?"

"No. It seemed to be implied that he was feeling discouraged. His plays—all those Comedies of Discomfiture, as he called them—are a bit outmoded, wouldn't you say?"

"Perhaps. But, Halberd, did you take any steps? Even mention this to any of the rest of us?"

"I wish to God I had. But I

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thought he was putting on an act." The patron's indulgent scorn for the artist sounded for a moment in Halberd's tones. "That sort of fellow is always dramatizing himself. And people don't often kill themselves just because they're feeling discouraged."

"That's certainly true. There are psychologists who maintain that suicide never happens except on top of a clinically recognizable depressive state. An exaggeration, perhaps, but no more than that. But here's my point. Whatever Vivarini said to you, Halberd, he can't have made away with himself. I found no weapon in that hut."

There was a long silence.

"That's just according to one witness—yourself—who was the first man on the scene." Gryde's voice was sharper still. And with a curiously reptilian effect his tongue flickered out over dry lips.

"Exactly. You take my point." Appleby smiled grimly. "Anybody can tell lies. But let's see if there's a revolver under those shirts now."

Watched by the others, Appleby made a brief rummage. No weapon was revealed.

"I may have killed him," Halberd said slowly. "And made up a stupid story about suicide, which the facts disprove."

"Certainly you may have." Appleby might have been discussing a hand at bridge. "But you're not going to be the only suspect."

"Obviously not." Childrey spoke for the first time. The least agitated of Appleby's companions, he might have been a rosy infant doubly flushed from sleep. "Nor are we—the four of us here—characters in a locked-room mystery. Why the lambing hut? Why did Vivarini go over there secretly in the night? To meet somebody unknown to us, one may suppose—and somebody who turned out not to care for him."

"It might still have been one of us he went to meet," Appleby said. "But may I come back to the business of going for help? I'm thinking of the weapon. If one of us killed Vivarini, he may then have had enough time to get quite a distance across the moor and back for the purpose of hiding the gun where no search will ever find it. On the other hand, one of us may have it on his person, or in a suitcase, at this moment. Whichever of us goes for help must certainly be searched first. Or perhaps all of us. Do you agree? . . . Good. I'll search each of you in turn—over there in that bedroom—and one of you can search me."

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"I'll come first," Childrey said easily. "But behind that closed door. Less embarrassing, eh?"

Appleby's was a very rapid frisking. "By the way," he asked at the end of it, "have you any notion how this fishing party originated? You didn't by any chance suggest it to Vivarini, or in any way put him up to it?"

"Lord, no! Came as a complete surprise to me. We'd been on bad terms, as a matter of fact."

"I'm sorry to hear it. Send in Halberd."

Five minutes later they were all in the living room again. In another ten minutes the whole place had been searched.

"No gun," Appleby said. "But another lie—or the appearance of it. Vivarini told me one of you had egged him on to organize this little fishing party. But each of you has denied it."

"All according to you," Gryde said.

"Yes, indeed. I'm grateful to you for so steadily reminding me. And now, who goes to telephone? It's at least five miles. I suggest we draw lots."

"No. I'm going." It was Childrey who spoke. "Trekking over the moors in darkness is my sort of thing. I'll just get into trousers and a jacket."

"The cunning criminal makes good his escape," Gryde said. "But it's all the same to me." He turned to Appleby. "While Cliff is louping over the heather—I believe that's the correct Scotch word—I suggest we open a bottle of whiskey and have a nice friendly chat."

It didn't prove at all friendly. Childrey's, it struck Appleby, had been the genuinely genial presence in the fishing party; now, when he had gone off with long strides through a darkness with which the moon had ceased to struggle, the atmosphere in the cottage deteriorated sharply.

"Odd that Vivarini should have made *you* that confidence, Ralph." Gryde said this after the whiskey bottle had clinked for a second time against his glass. "And odd that he asked you here. Wanted to make it up with you, I suppose. Tycoons make ugly enemies."

"What the devil do you mean, Gryde?" Halberd had sat bolt upright.

"And it's going to be awkward for that girl. He'd miscalculated, hadn't he? Thought she was just one of your notorious harem, no doubt, and that you wouldn't give a damn. Actually, you were ludicrously in love with her. Not unusual, once a man has reached the age of senile

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infatuation. Everybody was talking about it, you know. And I'm surprised you agreed to come here."

"One might be surprised that cheerful idiot Childrey agreed to come." Halberd had controlled himself with an effort in face of Gryde's sudden and astonishing assault. "He told me that *he* had been on poor terms with Freddie. And, for that matter, what about *you*, Mervyn? I believe—"

"I don't filch other men's trollops."

"You certainly don't. What you'd filch—"

"One moment." Appleby had set down his glass—and he plainly didn't mean to take it up again. "If we're to have this sort of thing—and experience tells me it may be inevitable—it had better be with *some* scrap of decency. No venom, please."

"Venom is Mervyn Gryde's middle name." Halberd reached for the bottle, but glanced at Appleby and thought better of it. "Read the stuff he writes about any play in which the *dramatis personae* aren't a bunch of sewer rats. Read some of the things he's recently said about Freddie. He had his knife in Freddie, You'd suppose some hideous private grudge." Halberd turned directly to the drama critic. "How you can have had the gall to accept an invitation from the poor devil beats me, Snaky Merv. That's what they called him at Cambridge long ago, you know." This had the character of an aside to Appleby. "Snaky Mervyn Gryde."

"I'm afraid," Appleby said drily, "that I can't contribute much to these amiable exchanges. I don't know a great deal about our late host. But of course—as you, Gryde, will be quick to point out—you have only my word for it. What I do see is that this party is revealing itself as having been organized by way of sinking differences and making friends again. And it hasn't had much luck. One result has been that, in your two selves, it brought here a couple of men with an undefined degree of animus against Vivarini. Perhaps Childrey is a third. Can either of you explain what Childrey meant by telling me he'd been on bad terms with Vivarini?"

"I can, because Freddie told me. Not that you'll believe me." Gryde, having apparently seen danger in too much whiskey, was chain-smoking nervously, so that he was like some small dark devil risen from a nether world amid mephitic vapors. "Childrey had refused to do a collected edition of Freddie's plays. And Freddie had found out it was

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because he was planning something of the sort for a rival playwright. Freddie was absolutely furious."

"I can certainly believe that. But it's scarcely a reason why Childrey should murder Vivarini. Rather the other way about."

"True enough." Gryde laughed shrilly. "But Freddie believed he was on the verge of exposing Childrey in some disreputable sharp practice about it all. He said he could wreck his good name as a publisher, and that he meant to do it."

"And had meantime invited him to this friendly party? It's an uncommonly odd tale."

"I said you wouldn't believe me."

"On the contrary." Appleby's smile was bleak. "I'm inclined to believe that the dead man told you just what you say he did."

"Thank you very much." It wasn't without looking disconcerted that Gryde said this. "And where the deuce do we go from here?"

"Exactly!" Halberd had got up and was restlessly pacing the room to the sound of a flip-flap of bedroom slippers. "Where the deuce—and all the damned to boot!"

"We wait for the local police," Appleby said quietly. "No doubt they will clear the matter up."

"Stuff and nonsense!" There was sudden violence in Halberd's voice. "And I don't see this as an occasion for superior Scotland Yard irony, Appleby. The rotten business is up to you."

"Well, yes. And I'm sorry about the irony. As a matter of fact, I rather agree with you. And I can't complain. You have both been most communicative—about yourselves, and about each other, and about Childrey. Childrey, too, had made his little spontaneous contribution. I really confront an *embarras de richesses*, so far as significant information goes. You have labored as one man, I might say, to give it to me."

"And just what do you mean by that?" Gryde asked sharply.

"Perhaps very little." Appleby yawned unashamedly. "One tends to talk at random in the small hours, wouldn't you say?" He stood up and walked to the open door of the cottage. "Lights in the lambing hut," he said. "Childrey has made uncommonly good time. And here he is."

"And here you are." Clifford Childrey nearly echoed Appleby's words as he stood in the doorway. "I was beginning to think I'd dreamed up the whole

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lot of you. Too fantastic—this affair."

"Is that," Halberd asked, "what the doctor and the local copper are saying?"

"I don't know about the copper. He's an experienced sergeant, settling in to a thorough search, and not saying much meanwhile. As for the sawbones, he's the nice old family-doctor type. Agrees, of course, that the poor devil has been stone-dead for at least a couple of hours. Seems to be wondering whether he was dead first, and dragged into the hut second. Suspects something rigged, you might say. Position of the body, and so forth. Appleby, what do you say to that?"

"I certainly felt an element of the theatrical to be present. But other things were present, too."

"Clues, do you mean?"

"Clues? Oh, yes—several. Enough, in fact, to admit of only one solution to the mystery."

Sir John Appleby glanced from one to another of three dumfounded faces, as if surprised that his announcement had occasioned any effect at all.

"As it happens," he said, "there is rather a good reason why the local sergeant won't find them—the clues, that's to say. But, as he is going to spend some time in the hunt, I propose to while away a quarter of an hour by telling you about them. Do you agree?"

"You'll have your say, I think, whether we agree or not." Halberd had sat down heavily. "So go on."

"Thank you. But, first, I'd like to ask you something. Does it strike you as at all odd that the three of you—each, apparently, with a rather large dislike of Vivarini—should have accepted his invitation to come here in this particular week?"

"He took a lot of trouble to arrange it," Gryde said. Gryde's voice had gone from high-pitched to husky. "Dates, and so forth."

"And there was this let-by-gones-be-bygones slant to it." Perhaps because his night tramp had been exhausting, Childrey might have been described as almost pale.

"Just that," Halberd said. "Wouldn't have been decent to refuse. Rum sort of coincidence, all the same—the particular lot of us."

"Coincidence?" Appleby said. "The word is certainly worth holding on to. Vivarini, incidentally, was holding on to something. Literally so, I mean. I removed that something from his left hand, and I have it in my pocket now. I don't intend

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to be mysterious about it. It was the cord of the silk dressing gown that Gryde is wearing at this moment."

"That's another of your filthy lies!" Before uttering this, Gryde had clutched grotesquely at his middle. Even as he did so, Appleby had produced the missing object and placed it quietly on the table.

"Making a bit free with the evidence, aren't you?" Childrey asked. He might have spoken out of a benevolent wish to give Gryde a moment in which to recover himself.

"Perhaps I am." Appleby offered this piece of innocence with perfect gravity. "As a matter of fact, I've done rather the same thing with what appears to be property—or the remains of property—of your own, my dear Childrey. If photostatic copies of papers with your firm's letterhead are to be regarded as your property, that's to say. You remember the little place we made to boil a kettle, down by the river, the other afternoon? I discovered that a small file of such papers had been burned there. And no time ago at all; I could still blow a spark out of them. Might they conceivably have been awkward, even compromising, documents that Vivarini had managed to get copies of—fatally for him, as it has turned out?"

"It's true about that collected edition," Childrey said abruptly. "I declined to do it, simply because there wouldn't be anything like an adequate market for it. It is untrue that I behaved improperly. And the notion of my killing Vivarini in order to recover and destroy—"

"But there's something more." Appleby had raised a hand in a civil request for silence. "Just to the side of the door of the lambing hut there happens to be a patch of caked mud. The first thing I found was a footprint in it. Not of a shoe, but of a bedroom slipper—with a soft rubber sole which carries a diamond-shaped maker's device on the instep. Yes, Halberd, you are quite right. You are wearing that slipper now."

"Well," Gryde said maliciously, "that's something the sergeant *will* find."

"Actually, I'm afraid not." Appleby looked properly conscience-stricken. "I was rather clumsy, I'm afraid. I happened to trod all over the thing."

"Can we have some explanation of all this madness—including your own totally irresponsible conduct?" It had been after a moment of stupefaction that Gryde had put this to Appleby.

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"Why, certainly. Each of you had a motive for killing Vivarini—or at least you can severally think up motives with which to confront one another. And in the case of each of you we now have a clue—a real damning mystery-story clue. There is a fairly simple explanation, is there not? One of you killed Vivarini, then deliberately planted two clues pointing to the other two of you. If only one of these clues was noticed, there would be one suspect; if both, there would be an indication that two of you had been in collusion. But in addition to planting those two clues *deliberately*, the murderer also dropped one, pointing to himself, *inadvertently*. Would you agree"—and Appleby glanced from one to another of his companions—"that we now have an explanation of the observed facts?"

"A singularly rubbishy one," Childrey said robustly.

"Very well, let me try again." Appleby paused—and when he resumed speaking it was almost as if a current of icy air had begun to blow through the cottage. "There *was* collusion—all three of you. And so incompetent have you been in your evil courses that you have all three made first-class errors. Childrey failed completely to destroy the papers he had managed to recover, and Gryde and Halberd both left physical traces of their presence in the lambing hut. Will that do?"

"My dear Appleby, I fear you have a poor opinion of us." Sweat was pouring down Gryde's face, but he managed to utter this with an air of mild mockery. "Should we be *quite* so inept? And there's something you just haven't accounted for: your own damnably odd conduct."

"Do you know, I'd call that right in the target area? Although I'd say it was not so much a matter of my conduct as of my mere presence." With an air of conscious relaxation Appleby began to fill his pipe. "We were talking about coincidence. Well, the really implausible coincidence was *my* being here. Don't you see? I was *meant* to be here. Vivarini wanted me here—and that even though he and I were no more than casual acquaintances. That was the first thing in my head when I found him dead. And it led me straight to the truth."

"The truth!" There was a dark flush on Halberd's face. "You mean to say you know the *truth*, and you've been entertaining us with all this damned rubbish?"

"I certainly know the truth."

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"May we be favored," Gryde almost growled, "with some notion of when you arrived at it?"

"Oh, almost at once. Before I came in to tell you that Vivarini had been shot. First I *thought* for a few minutes, you know. It's always the advisable thing to do. And then I went to have a look at the gas cylinders. And that settled it."

"Vivarini," Appleby said, "didn't like any of you. You'd refused to publish him as a classic, you'd reviewed him waspishly, you'd been in a mess with him about a girl. But what he really resented was being treated as outmoded. His so-called Comedy of Discomfiture—you all regarded it as old hat. Well, he decided to treat you to a whiff of that Comedy of Discomfiture.

"After all," Appleby continued blandly and with apparent inconsequence, "I was his guest, you know. I owed him something. It would have been a shame to knock that Comedy of Discomfiture too rapidly on the head."

"The man was a devil," Gryde said. "And you're a devil too."

"No, no—Vivarini wasn't really an evil man. He had me here so that there would be a sporting chance of giving you all no more than a bad half hour."

"Three hours." Childrey had glanced at his watch.

"Very well. And I've no doubt that he'd taken other measures. A letter on its way to Australia by surface mail, perhaps, and then due to come back the same way. At the worst you'd have had no more than a few months in jail."

"Go on," Halberd said grimly.

"There's very little to tell, really. He spread a few useful lies: that one of you had egged him on to arrange this fishing party; that he was nurturing something between thoughts and intentions of suicide—although that was *not* a lie; that he had evidence of some discreditable sharp practice on Childrey's part. Then, similarly, he prepared his few useful clues: making that footprint, filching the cord from Gryde's dressing gown, making his little imperfectly burned heap of old business letters. After that, he had just one more thing to prepare."

"You mean to tell us," Halberd said, "that he killed himself just for the fun of playing us a rotten trick?"

"Certainly. It was to be his final masterpiece in the Comedy of Discomfiture."

"But surely—"

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"My dear Halberd, didn't you notice he was a sick man? It's my guess that he was very sick indeed—with no more than months, or perhaps weeks, to live."

"My God—the poor devil! Ending his days with a revolting piece of malice." Halberd frowned. "What was that you said about gas cylinders?"

"There are three stored at the back of the cottage. Two contain butane, all right, but the third contains hydrogen. And all he needed apart from that was a fair-sized child's balloon—just not too big to go up that chimney. Plenty of lift in it to float away a very small gun. With this west wind blowing, it must be over the North Sea by now So you see why he had to die with his head in the fireplace—and why the doctor is puzzling over the odd position of the body."

"The sergeant of police," Gryde said, "isn't puzzling over that footprint. Because you trampled it out of existence."

There was a long silence while three exhausted fishermen stared at a retired Commissioner of Metropolitan Police.

"It will be thought," Appleby said, "that Vivarini was shot by some professional criminal who had an eye on our wallets, and who knew he had major charges to face if he was apprehended. Something like that. The police don't always end up with an arrest, but they never fail to end up with a theory of the crime."

"Is it going to be safe?" Gryde asked.

"Fairly safe, I'd suppose." For the first time since his arrival at Dunwinnie there was a hint of contempt in Appleby's voice. "But safe or not, I judge it decent that this particular Comedy of Discomfiture of Frederick Vivarini's shall never be played before a larger audience than it has enjoyed tonight."

"Q"

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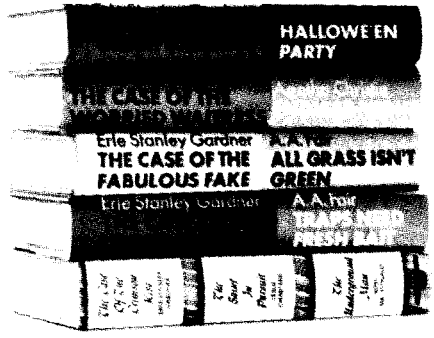

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